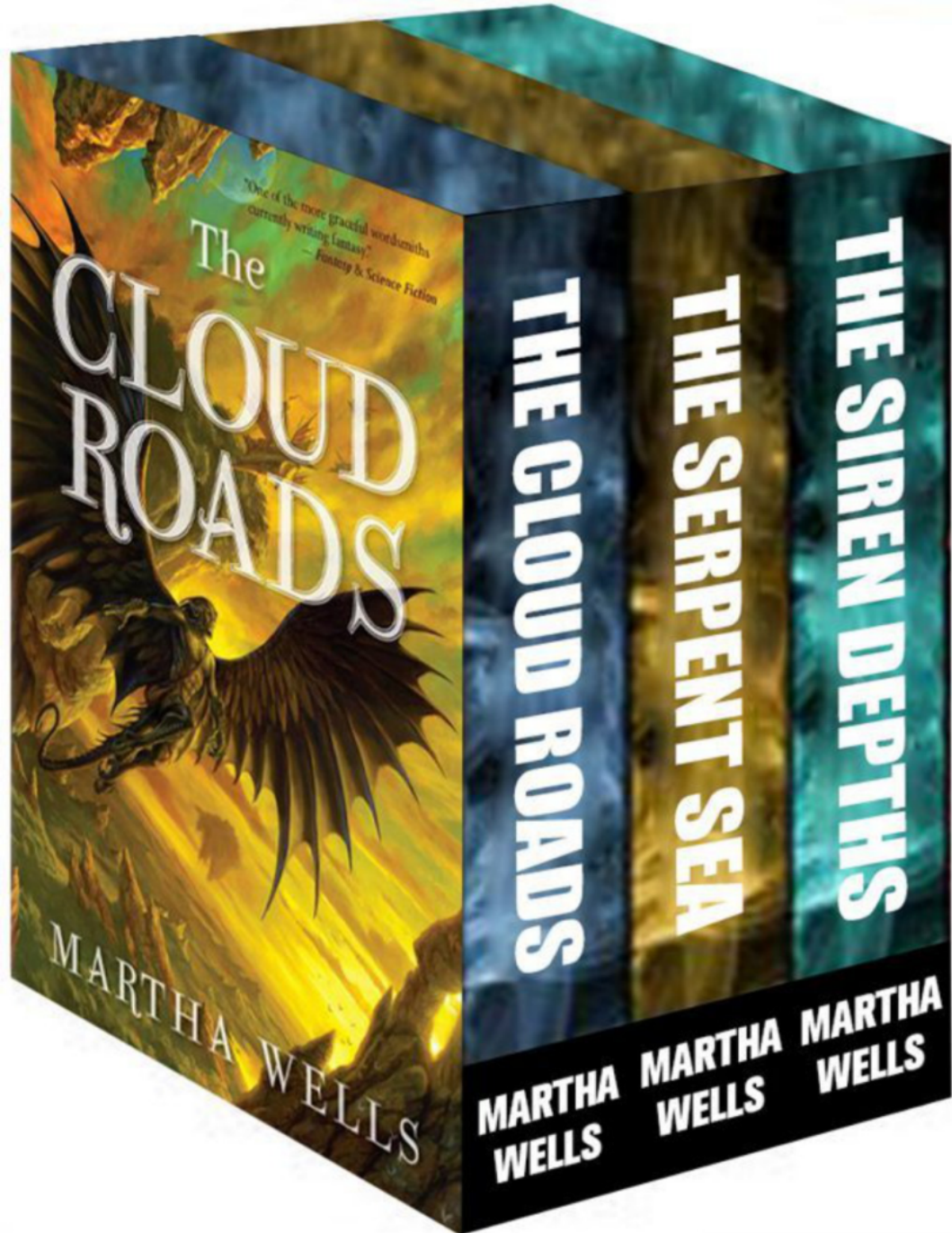




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The CLOUD ROADS

MARTHA WELLS

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THE SERPENT SEA

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THE SIREN DEPTHS

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The Serpent Sea

The Cloud Roads

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To Jennifer Jackson
for believing in this book

Chapter One

Moon had been thrown out of a lot of groundling settlements and camps, but he hadn't expected it from the Cordans.

The day started out normal enough. Moon had been hunting alone as usual, following the vargit, the big flightless birds common to this river valley. He had killed one for himself, then taken a nap on a sun-warmed rock and slept a little too long. By the time he found a second vargit for the camp, killed it, dressed it, and hauled it back, the sky was darkening. The gate in the rickety fence of woven sticks was closed, and he shook it, shifting the heavy dead bird on his shoulder. "Open up, it's me."

The gate and the entire fence were mostly a formality. The camp was built on a field leading down to the wide bed of the river, and the fence didn't even go all the way around. The jungle lay just outside it, climbing up the hills toward the steep cliffs and gorges to the east. The dense leaves of the tall trees, wreathed with vines and hung with heavy moss, formed a spreading canopy that kept the ground beneath in perpetual twilight. Anything could come out of there at the camp, and the weak fence wouldn't stop it. The Cordans knew that, but Moon still felt it gave a false sense of security that made everyone careless, especially the children. But the fence had sentimental value, reminding the Cordans of the walled towns in their old land in Kiaspur, before it had been taken by the Fell. Plans to take it down and use it for firewood always came to nothing.

After more shaking, something moved just inside the gate, and Hac's dull voice said, "Me who?" Then Hac laughed, a low noise that ended in a gurgling cough.

Moon looked away, letting out an exasperated breath. The fence wasn't made any more effective by letting the most mentally deficient member of the group guard it, but there weren't a lot of jobs Hac could do.

Sunset beyond the distant mountains cast the lush, forested hills with orange and yellow light. It also framed a sky-island, floating sedately high in the air over the far end of the valley. It had been drifting into the area for some days, traveling with the vagaries of the wind. Heavy vegetation overflowed the island's surface and hung

down the sides. Moon could just make out the shapes of ruined towers and walls nearly covered by encroaching greenery. A flock of birds with long white bodies, each big enough to seize a grazing herdbeast in its talons, flew past it, and Moon felt a surge of pure envy. Tonight, he promised himself. It's been long enough.

But for now he had to get into the damn camp. He tried to make his voice flat and not betray his irritation. Showing Hac you were annoyed just made him worse. "The meat's spoiling, Hac."

Hac laughed again, coughed again, and finally unlatched the gate.

Moon hauled the bird inside. Hac crouched on the ground beside the fence, watching him with malicious glee. Hac looked like a typical Cordan: short and stocky, with pale gray-green skin and dull green hair. Most Cordans had patches of small glittering scales on their faces or arms, legacy of an alliance with a sea realm sometime in the history of their dead empire. On some of the others, especially the young, the effect was like glittering skin-jewelry. On Hac, it just looked slimy.

Hac, who held a similar opinion of Moon, said, "Hello, ugly."

A few other outsiders lived with the Cordans, but Moon tended to stand out. A good head taller than most of them, he was lean and rawboned where they were heavyset. He had dark bronze skin that never burned no matter how bright the sun, dark hair. The only thing green about him was his eyes.

"Keep up the good work, Hac," Moon said, and resisted the urge to kick Hac in the head as he carried the carcass past.

Tents were scattered across the compound, conical structures made of woven cable-rushes, dried and pressed and faintly sweet-smelling. They stretched down to the greenroot plantings at the edge of the broad river bed. At the moment, most of the inhabitants were gathered around the common area in the camp's center, portioning out the meat the hunters had brought back. People down at the river washed and filled big clay water jars. A few women worked at the cooking fires outside the tents. As Moon walked up the packed dirt path toward the central area, an excited band of children greeted him, hurrying along beside him and staring curiously at the vargit. Their enthusiastic welcome went a long way to make up for Hac.

The elders and other hunters all sat around on straw mats in front of the elders' tent, and some of the women and older kids were busy cutting and wrapping the kills brought back earlier. Moon dropped the vargit carcass on the muddy straw mat with the others, and set aside the bow and quiver of arrows he hadn't used. He had gotten very good at dressing his game in such a way that it was impossible to tell

exactly how it had been killed. Dargan the headman leaned forward to look at it and nodded approval. "You had a good day after all, then. When you were late, we worried."

"I had to track them down the valley. It just took a little longer than I thought." Moon sat on his heels at the edge of the mat, stifling a yawn. He was still full from his first kill, which had been a much bigger vargit. Most of his time had gone to finding a more medium-sized one that he could carry back without help. But the novelty of coming home to people who worried that something might have happened to him had never paled.

Ildras, the chief hunter, gave him a friendly nod. "We never saw you, and thought perhaps you'd gone toward the west."

Moon made a mental note to make certain he crossed paths with Ildras' group tomorrow, and to make certain it happened more frequently from now on. He was comfortable here, and it was making him a little careless. He knew from long experience that elaborate lies were a bad idea, so he just said, "I didn't see anybody either."

Dargan waved for one of the boys to come over to cut up Moon's kill. Dargan and the other male elders kept track of all the provisions, portioning them out to the rest of the camp. It made sense, but the way they did it had always bothered Moon. He thought the others might resent it sometimes, but it was hard to tell since nobody talked about it.

Then Ildras nudged Dargan and said, "Tell him the news."

"Oh, the news." Dargan's expression turned briefly sardonic. He told Moon, "The Fell have come to the valley."

Moon stared. But Ildras's expression was wry, and the others looked, variously, amused, bored, and annoyed. Two of the boys skinning a herdbeast carcass collapsed into muffled giggling and were shushed by one of the women. Moon decided this was one of those times when he just didn't understand the Cordans' sense of humor. He discarded the first few responses that occurred to him and went with, "Why do you say that?"

Dargan nodded toward another elder. "Tacras saw it."

Tacras, whose eyes were too wide in a way that made him look a little crazy, nodded. "One of the harbingers, a big one."

Moon bit his lip to control his expression and tried to look thoughtful. Obviously the group had decided to humor Tacras. The creatures the Cordans knew as harbingers were actually called major kethel, the largest of all Fell. If one had been near the camp, Moon

would have scented it. It would be in the air, in the river water. The things gave off an unbelievable stench. But he couldn't exactly tell the Cordans that. Also, if Tacras had been close enough to see a major kethel, it would have eaten him. "Where?"

Tacras pointed off to the west. "From the cliff on the edge of the forest, where it looks down into the gorge."

"Did it speak to you?" Vardin asked in wide-eyed mockery.

"Vardin," Dargan said in reproof, but it was a little too late.

Tacras glared. "You disrespect your elder!" He shoved to his feet. "Be fools then. I know what I saw."

He stamped away, off between the tents, and everybody sighed. Ildras reached over and gave Vardin a shove on the shoulder, apparently as punishment. Moon kept his mouth shut and did not wince in annoyance. They had all been making fun of the old man anyway. Vardin had just brought it out in the open. If Dargan hadn't wanted that to happen, he shouldn't have made his own derision so clear.

"He's crazy," Kavath said, sounding sour and worried as he watched Tacras walk away. He was another outsider, though he had been here much longer than Moon. He had shiny pale blue skin, a long narrow face, and a crest of gray feathers down the middle of his skull. "He's going to cause a panic."

The Cordans all just shrugged, looking unlikely to panic. Dargan added, "Everyone knows he's a little touched. They won't listen. But do not contradict him. It's disrespectful to his age." With the air of being done with the whole subject, he turned to Moon and said, "Now tell us if you saw any bando-hoppers down in that end of the valley. I think it must be the season for them soon."

When Moon had first found the Cordans and been accepted into their group, Dargan had presented him with a tent, and with Selis and Ilane. Moon had been very much looking forward to the tent; in fact, it was the whole reason he had wanted to join the Cordans in the first place. He had been traveling alone a long time at that point, and the idea of sleeping warm and dry, without having to worry about something coming along and eating him, had been too attractive to pass up. The reality was every bit as good as he had hoped. Selis and Ilane, however, had taken some getting used to.

It was twilight by the time he reached his tent, shadows gathering. He met Selis coming out with the waterskin.

"You took long enough," she snapped, and snatched the packet of

meat away.

“Tell that to Dargan,” Moon snapped back. She knew damn well that he had to wait for the elders to divide up the kill, but he had given up trying to reason with her about three days after being accepted into the Cordan camp. He took the waterskin away from her and went to fill it at the troughs.

When the Cordans had fled their last town, many of their young men had been killed covering their escape. It had left them with a surplus of young women. The Cordans believed the women needed men to provide for them; Moon had no idea why. He knew that Selis in particular was perfectly capable of chasing down any number of grasseaters and beating them to death with a club, so he didn’t see why she couldn’t hunt for herself. But it was the way the Cordans lived, and he wasn’t going to argue. And he liked Ilane.

By the time he got back, Selis had the meat laid out on a flat stone and was cutting it up into portions. Ilane sat on a mat beside the fire.

Ilane was beautiful, though the other Cordans didn’t think so, and their lack of regard had made her quiet and timid. She was too tall, too slender, with a pearlescent quality to her pale green skin. Moon had tried to tell her that in most of the places he had lived, she would be considered lovely, that it was just a matter of perception. But he wasn’t certain he had ever been able to make her understand. Selis looked more typically Cordan, stocky and strong, with iridescent patches on her cheeks and forehead. He wasn’t sure why she had been stuck with him, but suspected her personality had a lot to do with it.

Moon stowed his weapons in the tent and dropped down onto the mat next to Ilane. She was peeling a greenroot, the big, melon-like staple that the Cordans ate with everything, fried, mashed, or raw. After the kill earlier in the day, Moon wasn’t hungry and wouldn’t be for the next day or so. But not eating in front of other people was one of the first mistakes he had ever made, and he didn’t intend to make it again. It had gotten him chased out of the nice silk-weaving town of Var-tilth, and the memory still stung.

“Moon.” Ilane’s voice was always quiet, but this time it held a note of painful hesitancy. “Do you think the Fell are here?”

Tacras’ story had, of course, spread all over camp. Moon knew he should say what Dargan had said, but looking at Ilane, her pale green skin ashy-gray with fear, he just couldn’t. “No. I’ve been hunting in the open all up and down the valley and I haven’t seen anything. Neither have the others.”

As she wrapped the meat up in bandan leaves to put into the coals, Selis said, "So Tacras lies because he wants to frighten us to death for his amusement."

Moon pretended to consider it. "Probably not. Not everybody's like you."

She gave him a sour grimace. Forced into actually asking a question, she said, "Then what?"

Ilane was having trouble getting the knife through the tough greenroot skin. Moon took it and sawed the hard ends off. He squinted at Selis. "Do you know how many things there are that fly besides Fell?"

Selis' jaw set. She did know, but she didn't want to admit it. All the Cordans knew that further up in the hills, there were birds, flighted and not, that were nearly as large as the small Fell, and nearly as dangerous.

"So Tacras was wrong?" Ilane said, her perfect brow creased in a frown.

Moon finished stripping the greenroot's outer husk and started to slice it. "He saw it with the sun in his eyes, and made a mistake."

"We should all be so lucky," Selis said, but Moon knew enough Selis-speak to hear it as a grudging admission that he was probably right.

He hoped he was right. Investigating it gave him yet another reason to go out tonight.

"You're cutting the greenroot wrong," Selis snapped.

Moon waited until late into the night, lying on his back and staring at the shadows on the tent's curved supports, listening to the camp go gradually quiet around him. The air was close and damp, and it seemed to take a long time for everyone to settle down. It would never go silent; there were too many people. But it had been a while since he had heard a voice nearby, or the low wail of a fretful baby.

Moon slid away from Ilane. She stirred, making a sleepy sound of inquiry. He whispered, "It's too warm. I'm going to take a walk, maybe sleep outside."

She hummed under her breath and rolled over. Moon eased to his feet, found his shirt, and made a wide circle around Selis' pallet as he slipped outside.

He and Ilane had been sleeping together since the second month Moon had been here. She had made the first overtures to him before

that, apparently, but Moon hadn't understood what she wanted. Ilane hadn't understood what she had interpreted as his refusal, either, and had been very unhappy. Moon had had no idea what was going on and had seriously considered a strategic retreat—right out of the camp—until one night Selis had thrown her hands in the air in frustration and explained to him what Ilane wanted.

Ilane was sweet-tempered, but her lack of understanding was sometimes frustrating. Several days ago, she had said she wanted to have a baby, and Moon had had to tell her he didn't think it was possible. That had been a hard conversation.

She had just stared tragically at him, her eyes huge, as if this was something he was deliberately withholding. "We're too different," he told her, feeling helpless. "I'm not a Cordan." He thought that if there had been any chance of it, it would have happened already.

Ilane blinked and her silver brows drew together. "You want Selis instead."

Selis, sitting across the fire and mending the ripped sleeve of a shirt, shook her head in weary resignation. "Just give up," she told Moon.

Moon threw her a grim look and persisted, telling Ilane, "No, no, I don't think...I can't give you a baby. It just won't happen." He added hopefully, "You could have babies with somebody else and bring them to live with us." Now that he thought about it, it wasn't a bad idea. He knew he could bring in enough food for a larger group, even with the elders taking their share.

Ilane had just continued to stare. Selis had muttered to Moon, "You are so stupid."

He stepped outside. The air was cool compared to the close interior of the tent, with just enough movement to lift the damp a little. The full moon was bright, almost bright enough to see the groundling woman that supposedly lived in it. The sky was crowded with stars; it was hard not to just leap into the air.

Moon stood beside the tent for a moment, pretending to stretch. Across the width of the camp, two sentries stood at the gate with torches, but the cooking fires were out or banked. He carried Ilane's scent on his skin, and the whole camp smelled of Cordan, so it was tricky to sense anyone nearby. But he wasn't going to get a better chance.

His bare feet were silent on the packed ground between the tents. He didn't see anyone else, but he could hear deep breathing, the

occasional sleepy mutter as he passed. He stopped at the latrine ditches, pissed into one, then wandered off, tying the drawstring on his pants again.

He went toward the far end of the camp, where the fence ran down toward edge of the river channel. Made of bundles of saplings roped together, the fence wasn't very secure at the best of times but here, where it cut across the slope of the bank, there were gaps under the bottom. Moon dropped to the ground and wiggled under one.

Once through the fence, he loped across the field and reached the fringe of the jungle. There, in the deep shadow, he shifted.

Moon didn't know what he was, just that he could do this. His body got taller, his shoulders broader. He was stronger but much lighter, as if his bones weren't made of the same stuff anymore. His skin hardened, darkened, grew an armor of little scales, overlapping almost like solid feathers. In this shadow it made him nearly invisible; in bright sunlight the scales would be black with an under sheen of bronze. He grew retractable claws on his hands and feet and a long flexible tail, good for hanging upside down off tree branches. He also had a mane of flexible frills and spines around his head, running down to his lower back; in a fight they could be flared out into rigid spikes to protect his head and back.

Now he unfolded his wings and leapt into the air, hard flaps carrying him higher and higher until he caught the wind.

It was cooler up here, the wind hard and strong. He did a long sweep of the valley first, just in case Tacras was right, but didn't see or catch scent of anything unusual. Past the jungle, the broad grassy river plain was empty except for the giant lumpy forms of the big armored grasseaters that the Cordans called kras. He flew up into the hills, passing over narrow gorges and dozens of small waterfalls. The wind was rougher here, and he controlled his wing curvature with delicate movements, playing the air along his joints and scales.

There was no sign of Fell, no strange groundling tribes, nothing the Cordans needed to worry about.

Moon turned back toward the sky-island where it floated in isolation over the plain. He pushed himself higher until he was well above it.

He circled over the island. Its shape was irregular, with jagged edges. It had been hard to tell how large it was from the ground; from above he could see it was barely four hundred paces across, smaller than the Cordans' camp. It was covered with vegetation, trees with narrow trunks winding up into spirals, heavy falls of vines and white,

night-blooming flowers. But he could still make out the round shape of a tower, and a building that was a series of stacked squares of vine-covered stone. There were broken sections of walls, choked pools and fountains.

He spotted a balcony jutting out of curtains of foliage and dropped down toward it. He landed lightly on the railing; his claws gripped the pocked stone. Folding his wings, he stepped down onto the cracked tiles, parting the vines to find the door. It was oblong and narrow, and he shifted back to groundling form to step through.

Fragments of moonlight fell through the cracks and the heavy shrouds of vegetation. The room smelled strongly of earth and must. Moon sneezed, then picked his way carefully forward.

He still wore his clothes; it was a little magic, to make the shift and take any loose fabric attached to his body with him, but it had taken practice to be able to do it. His mother had taught him, the way she had taught him to fly. He had never gotten the trick of shifting with boots on. His feet had a heavy layer of extra skin on the sole, thick as scar tissue, so he usually went barefoot.

When he was a boy, after being hounded out of yet another settlement, Moon had tried to make his groundling form look more like theirs, hoping it would make him fit in better. His mother had never mentioned that ability, but he thought it was worth a try. He might as well have tried to turn himself into a rock or a tree, and after a time he had concluded that the magic just didn't work that way. There was this him, and the scaly winged version, and that was it.

He made his way to the door, startling a little flock of flighted lizards, all brilliant greens and blues. They fluttered away, hissing harmlessly, and he stepped into the next room. The ceiling was several levels above him, and the room had tall doorways and windows that looked into an atrium shaped like a six-pointed star. Shafts of moonlight pierced the darkness, illuminating a mosaic tile floor strewn with debris and a shallow pool filled with bright blue flowers. Doorways led off into more shadowed spaces.

He made his way from one room to another, the tile gritty under his feet. He poked at broken fragments of pottery and glass, pushed vines away from faded wall murals. It was hard to tell in this bad light, but the people in the murals seemed to be tall and willowy, with long flowing hair and little bundles of tentacles where their mouths should be. There was something to do with a sea realm, but he couldn't tell if it was a battle, an alliance, or just a myth.

Moon had been very young when his mother and siblings had

been killed, and she had never told him where they had come from. For a long time he had searched sky-islands looking for some trace of his own people. The islands flew; it stood to reason that the inhabitants might be shifters who could fly. But he had never found anything, and now he just explored because it gave him something to do.

When Moon had first joined the Cordans, he hadn't thought of staying this long. He had lived with other people he had liked—most recently the Jandin, who had lived in cliff caves above a waterfall, and the Hassi, with their wooden city high in the air atop a thick mat of link-trees—but something always happened. The Fell came or someone got suspicious of him and he had to move on. He had never lived with anyone long enough to truly trust them, to tell them what he was. But living alone, even with the freedom to shift whenever he felt like it or needed to, wore on him. It seemed pointless and, worst of all, it was lonely. Lost in thought, he said, “You're never satisfied,” not realizing he had spoken aloud until the words broke the stillness.

In the next room, he found a filigreed metal cabinet built into the wall stuffed with books. Digging down through a layer of moldy, disintegrating lumps of paper and leather, he found some still intact. These were folded into neat packets and made of thin, stiff sheets of either very supple metal or thin reptile hide. Moon carried a pile back out to the atrium, sat on the gritty tile in a patch of moonlight near the flower-filled fountain, and tried to read.

The text was similar to Altanic, which was a common language in the Three Worlds, though this version was different enough that Moon couldn't get much sense out of it. But there were drawings with delicate colors, pictures of the people with the tentacle faces. They rode strange horned beasts like bando-hoppers and flew in carriages built on the backs of giant birds.

It was so absorbing, he didn't realize he was being watched until he happened to glance up.

He must have heard something, smelled something, or just sensed another living presence. He looked up the open shaft of the atrium, noticing broad balconies, easy pathways to other interior rooms if he shifted and used his claws to climb to them. Then he found a shadow on one of the balconies, a shadow in the wrong place.

At first he tried to see it as a statue, it was so still. Then moonlight caught the gleam of scales on sinuous limbs, claws gripping the stone railing, the curve of a wing ending in a pointed tip.

Moon's breath caught and his blood froze. He thought, You idiot.

Then he flung himself through the nearest doorway.

He scrambled back through the debris, then crouched, listening. He heard the creature move, a rasp of scales as it uncoiled, clink of claws on stone. He thought it was too big to come further in, that it would go up, and out. Moon bolted back through the inner rooms.

He couldn't afford to be trapped in here; he had one chance to get past that thing and he had to take it now. He skidded around the corner, his bare feet slipping on mossy tile, and scrabbled up a pile of broken stone to a vine-draped window. He jumped through, already shifting.

He felt movement in the air before he saw the claws reaching for him. Moon jerked away with a sharp twist that wrenched his back. He swiped at the dark shape suddenly right on top of him. He swung wildly, catching it a glancing blow across the face, feeling his claws catch on tough scales. It pulled back, big wings knocking tiles and fragments of greenery off the sides of the ruin.

Moon tumbled in midair toward the cracked pavement below, caught himself on a ledge around a half-destroyed tower, and clung to the stone. He looked back just as the creature flapped upward in a spray of rock chips and dead leaves. Oh, it's big, Moon thought, his heart pounding. Not big enough to eat him in one bite, maybe. But it was three times his size if not more. Moon's wingspan was close to twenty paces, fully extended; this creature's span was more than forty. So two bites, maybe three. And it wasn't an animal. It had known it was looking at a shifter. It had expected him to fly out of an upper window, not walk or climb out.

As the creature flapped powerful wings, positioning itself to dive at him, Moon shoved off from the tower, sending himself out and down, over the edge of the sky-island. He angled his wings, diving in close past the jagged rock and the waterfalls of heavy greenery. He landed on a spur of rock and clung like a lizard. Digging his claws in, he climbed down and under, folding and tucking his wings and tail in, making himself as small as possible.

He kept his breath slow and shallow, hoping he didn't have to cling here too long. His claws were meant for fastening onto wooden branches, not rock, and this was already starting to hurt. He couldn't hear the creature, but he wasn't surprised when a great dark shape dove past. It circled below the island, one slow circuit to try to spot Moon. He hoped it was looking down toward the jungle.

It made another circuit, then headed upward to pass back over the top of the island.

Here goes, Moon thought. He aimed himself for the deep part of the river, flexed his claws, and let go.

Tilting his wings for the least wind resistance, he fell like a rock. The air rushed past him and he counted heartbeats, gauging how long it would take the creature to make a slow sweep over the sky-island. Then he rolled over to look up, just in time to see the dark shape appear at the western end of the island.

It saw him instantly. It didn't howl with rage, it just dove for him.

Uh oh. Moon twisted back around, arrowing straight down. The rapidly approaching ground was a green blur, broken by the dark expanse of the river.

At the last instant, he cupped his wings and slowed just enough before he slammed into the river. He plunged deep into the cold water, down until he scraped the bottom. Folding his wings in tightly, he kicked to stay below the surface, the rushing current carrying him along.

Moon wasn't as fast in the water as he was in the air, but he was faster in this form than as a groundling. Swimming close to the sandy bottom, Moon stayed under until his lungs were about to burst, then headed for the bank and the thick stands of reeds. The reeds were topped with large, wheel-shaped fronds that made a good screen from above. Moon let his face break the surface, just enough to get a breath. The fronds made a good screen from below, too, but after a few moments, Moon saw the creature make a lazy circle high above the river. He had been hoping it would slam into the bank and snap its neck, but no such luck. But he knew the water would keep it from following his scent. It probably knew that, too. He filled his lungs, sunk down again, and kicked off.

He surfaced twice more, and the second time, he couldn't spot the creature. Still careful, he stayed under, following the river all the way back to camp. Once there, he shifted back to groundling underwater, then swam toward the shore, until it was shallow enough that he could walk up the sloping bank.

He sat down on the sparse grass above the water, his clothes dripping, letting his breath out in a long sigh. His back and shoulder were sore, pain carried over from nearly twisting himself in half to avoid the creature's first grab. He still hadn't gotten a good look at it. This is going to be a problem. And he and all the Cordans owed Tacras an apology.

But that thing wasn't Fell—he knew that from its lack of scent. It might live on the island, drifting with it, and just hadn't needed to

hunt yet. Or it might just be passing through, and had used the island as a place to shelter and sleep.

He thought it must have been sleeping when he had reached the ruins, or he would have heard it moving around. Idiot, you could have been dinner. If it had snatched him in his groundling form, it could have snapped him in half before he had a chance to shift.

If it attacked the camp, what it was or why it had come here wouldn't matter much; it could still kill most of the Cordans before they had a chance to take cover in the jungle. Moon was going to have to warn them.

Except he couldn't exactly run into the center of the camp yelling an alarm. If he said he had seen it tonight, while sitting out by the river...No, he could hear that the camp wasn't as quiet as it had been when he left. It was a warm night, and there must be others sitting or sleeping outside, who would say they hadn't seen anything. He would look as unreliable as Tacras and no one would listen to him. He would have to wait until tomorrow.

When he went hunting, he would walk down the valley toward the sky-island. That would give him a chance to scout the island by air again, to see if the creature was still there, if it would come out in the daylight. Cautiously scout, he reminded himself. He didn't want to get eaten before he could warn the Cordans. But when he told them he had seen the same creature as Tacras at that end of the valley, they would have to take it seriously.

Moon pushed wearily to his feet and wrung out the front of his shirt. As he started back up the long slope of the bank, he considered the other problem: what the Cordans were going to do once they were warned.

Moon didn't have any answers for that one. The creature would either drive them out of the valley or it wouldn't. He knew he couldn't take it in an open fight. But if he could think of a way to trap it... He had killed a few of the smaller major kethel that way, but they weren't exactly the cleverest fighters; he had the feeling this thing... was different.

Moon took the long way back through the camp, which let him pass the fewest number of tents. Still thinking about traps and tactics, he came in sight of his tent and halted abruptly. The banked fire had been stirred up, and the coals were glowing. In its light he could see a figure sitting in front of the doorway. A heartbeat later he recognized Ilane, and relaxed.

He walked up to the tent, dropping down to sit next to her on the

straw mat. "Sorry I woke you. I went down to the river." That part was obvious; he was still dripping.

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep." It was too dark to read her expression, but she sounded the same as she always did. She wore a light shift, and used a fold of her skirt to lift a small kettle off the fire. "I'm making a tisane. Do you want some?"

He didn't; the Cordans supposedly used herbs to make it but it just tasted like water reed to him. But it was habit to accept any food offered to him, just to look normal. And Ilane hardly ever cooked; he felt he owed it to Selis to encourage it when she did.

She poured the steaming water into a red-glazed ceramic pot that belonged to Selis and handed Moon a cup.

Selis poked her head out of the tent, her hair tumbled around her face. "What are you—" She saw Moon and swore, then added belatedly, "Oh, it's you."

"Do you want a cup of tisane?" Ilane asked, unperturbed.

"No, I want to sleep," Selis said pointedly, and vanished back into the tent.

The tisane tasted more reedy than usual, but Moon sat and drank it with Ilane. He listened to her detail the love affairs of nearly everybody else in camp while he nodded at the right moments and mostly thought about what he was going to say to Dargan tomorrow. Though he was a little surprised to hear that Kavath was sleeping with Selis' cousin Denira.

He didn't remember falling asleep.

Chapter Two

Moon didn't so much wake up as drift slowly toward consciousness. It seemed like a dream, one of those in which he thought he was awake, trying to move his sluggish still-sleeping body, until he finally succeeded in making some jerky motion and startling himself conscious. Except he didn't succeed.

He finally woke enough to realize he lay on his stomach, face half-buried in a thick, felted blanket that smelled like the herbs Selis used to wash everything. His throat was dry and his body ached in ways it never had before, little arcs of pain running up his spine and out through the nerves in his arms and legs. In panicked reflex he tried to shift, realizing his mistake an instant later. If he was ill now, he would be ill in his other form. And he could see daylight on the tent wall; someone might be just outside.

But nothing happened. He was still in groundling form.

Nothing. I can't— He tried again. Still nothing. His heart started to pound in panic. He was sick, or it was a magical trap, some lingering taint from whatever had killed the inhabitants of the sky-island.

He heard voices just outside—Selis, Dargan, some of the others, not Ilane. With an effort that made his head spin, he shoved himself up on his elbows. More pain stabbed down his spine, taking his breath away. He tried to speak, coughed, and managed to croak, “Ilane?”

Footsteps, then someone grabbed his shoulder and shoved him over. Dargan leaned over him, then recoiled, his face appalled, disgusted.

“What—” Moon gasped, confused. He knew he hadn't shifted. Half a dozen hunters pushed into the tent, Garin, Kavath, Ildras. Someone grabbed his wrists and dragged him outside onto the packed dirt of the path. Morning light stung his eyes. People surrounded him, staring in condemnation and horror.

I'm sick and they're going to kill me, Moon thought, baffled. It didn't make any sense, but he felt the answer looming over him like a

club. He managed to push himself up into a sitting position. They scrambled away from him. Oh. Oh, no. It couldn't be what it seemed like. They know. They have to know.

Dargan stepped into view again. His face was hard but he wouldn't meet Moon's eyes. Dargan said, "The girl saw you. You're a Fell, a demon."

Except a club would have been quick—one brief instant of stunned agony, then nothing. "I'm not." Moon choked on a breath and had to stop and pant for air. Ilane had done this. "I don't know what I am." Desperate, he tried to shift again, and felt nothing.

"The poison only works on Fell." Dargan stepped back, signaling to someone.

Poison. Ilane had seen him shift, then gone back and readied the poison, and waited calmly for him to return.

He heard running footsteps and suddenly Selis landed on her knees beside him. Her voice low and desperate, she said, "She followed you, saw you change. She probably thought you were going to another woman, the stupid little bitch." The others shouted at her to come away.

With everything else, Moon barely felt this shock. "You knew."

"I followed you the first time you left at night, months ago. But you never hurt anyone and you were good to us." Selis' face twisted in grief and anger. "She ruined everything. I just wanted my own home."

Moon felt something wrench inside him. "Me too."

Kavath darted forward, grabbed Selis' arm, and dragged her to her feet. Selis twisted in his grip and punched him in the face. Moon had just enough time to be bitterly glad for it. Then the others jumped him, slamming him to the ground.

One arm was dragged up over his head, the other pinned under someone's knee. Moon bucked and twisted, too weak to dislodge them. Someone grabbed his hair, yanked his head back, and covered his nose, cutting off his air. He bit the first hand that tried to pry at his mouth, but pressure on his jaw hinge forced it open. One of them punched him in the stomach at the right moment and his involuntary gasp drew the liquid in. Most of it went into his lungs, but they released him, shoving to their feet.

Moon rolled over, coughing and choking, trying to spit the stuff out. Then darkness fell over him like a blanket.

Moon drifted in and out. He felt himself being carried and heard a

babble of confused voices, fading in the distance. The sunlight was blinding and he could only see shapes outlined against it. He heard wind moving through trees, the hum of insects, squawks from treelings, birdcalls. His throat was scratchy and painfully dry. Swallowing hurt, and there was a metallic tang in his mouth, the aftertaste of the poison. It tasted a little like Fell blood.

Whoever carried him dumped him abruptly; stony ground and dry grass came up and slapped him in the back of the head. The jolt knocked him closer to consciousness. They were in a big clearing, a rocky field surrounded by the tall, thin plume trees of the upper slopes of the valley. He rolled over to try to sit up; somebody stepped on his back, shoving him down again.

Enough of this. Rage gave him strength and he shot out an arm, grabbed an ankle, and yanked. A heavy form hit the ground with a thump and a grunt, and the weight was off him. Moon tried to shove to his feet but only made it to his hands and knees before the world swayed erratically. He slumped to the ground, barely managing to hold himself half upright. Desperately, he tried to shift. Again, nothing happened.

A kick caught him in the stomach. He fell sideways and curled around the pain, gasping.

Someone grabbed his right arm and dragged him around, then clamped something metal and painful around his wrist. Moon opened his bleary eyes to see it was a manacle and a chain. He hadn't even known that the Cordans had chains. They hadn't even had enough big water kettles to go around, and they had wasted metal on chains?

Moon lay on his back in the dirt, his shirt shoved up under his armpits, pebbles digging painfully into his skin. By the sun, it was mid-morning, maybe a little later. He felt a hard jerk on the manacle, turned his head to see Garin and Vergan pounding a big metal stake into the ground. Moon took an uneven raspy breath and forced the words out: "I never did anything to you."

Vergan faltered, but Garin shook his head and kept pounding. After a moment, Vergan started again.

Finally Vergan stepped back and Garin tugged one more time on the chain, making certain it was secure. They backed away, then hurried across the clearing. Moon saw them join more Cordans waiting under the trees, then the whole group retreated out of sight.

Still alive, Moon reminded himself, but at the moment it was hard to muster enthusiasm for it. He shoved himself up, rolling over—and froze, staring at the back of his hand.

There was a ghost pattern of scales, his scales, on his hands, his arms. He sat up and looked down the open neck of his shirt. It was everywhere, a faint, dark outline just under the upper layer of his skin, obscured by the dusting of dark hair on his chest, his forearms. He rubbed at his hands, his arms, but couldn't feel anything. Oh, that's... bizarre. This had to be an effect of the poison. Suddenly uncomfortable in his own skin, he twitched uneasily, running hands over his face, through his hair, but everything else seemed normal.

At least now he knew why they had been so certain. They weren't just taking Ilane's word for it.

Ilane. He couldn't afford to think about her right now. Later. He pried at the manacle on his wrist and tugged at the chain, looking for weak spots.

The sun beat down on his head, heat radiating up from the ground. The tall plume trees and underbrush around the clearing shielded him from any cool breeze, making it hot enough to torture a real groundling. Testing each link for weakness, Moon kept one uneasy eye on the green shadows under the trees. The Cordans were still out there somewhere, watching.

The chain wasn't well made, but it didn't yield, even when he braced his foot against the stake and leaned his whole weight on it. He gave that up and started digging around the stake itself. The dirt was hard and packed with broken rock, and it was slow going. And he had to worry that the Cordans might decide he was too close to escape and come out to knock him in the head. Instinctively he kept trying to shift, snarling impatiently at himself when nothing happened. This poison had to wear off sometime.

If it isn't permanent. The thought had been hovering but articulating it was worse. It formed a cold, tight lump in his throat, threatening to choke him. He couldn't live only as a groundling. It wasn't what he was. He was some weird combination of both. To lose one form or the other would cripple him as surely as losing his legs.

He hadn't even known a poison like this existed. The Cordans had been driven out of their old territory in Kiaspur by the Fell, and the elders had told stories of battles against them, but nobody had ever mentioned this poison, or the fact that they had brought it with them into exile. But even if you'd known, you wouldn't have thought it would do this to you, he reminded himself grimly. He knew he wasn't a Fell.

He wouldn't have thought that Ilane would do this to him.

His fingers were already sore and bleeding, and the hollow in the

hard ground around the stake wasn't very deep. Moon dug up a couple of fist-sized rocks and set them aside, but those were the only weapons he had. He stood, putting his full weight on the chain again, working it back and forth. Abruptly he realized the birdsong had gone quiet. He jerked his head up and scanned the trees, pivoting slowly.

On the far side of the clearing something rustled in the undergrowth, movement deep in the shadows. Moon hissed in dismay. And this is when it gets worse. He dropped to the ground again and dug frantically, gritting his teeth. There wasn't much else he could do. He had two rocks and he was still chained to this stake. This wasn't going to be good.

A giant vargit walked out of the jungle. It wasn't like the smaller ones down in the river valley that the Cordans hunted for food. It was a good twelve paces high at least, its beak long and sharp, its bright, greedy eyes fixed on Moon. Dark green feathers shaded to brown on its belly, and its wings were stunted, shaped almost like hooks, but it could stretch them out to snatch at prey.

Moon eased up into a crouch and picked up his first rock. He knew he could take a giant vargit—from the air, in his other form. Like this, unarmed, chained to the stake, all he could do was make sure the vargit had to work for its meal.

It cocked its head, sensing resistance, stalking toward him. Moon waited until it was barely ten paces away, then flung his first rock.

The rock bounced off its head, and the vargit jerked back with a shrill cry. But he hadn't managed to crack its tough skull or, if he had, it just didn't care. It crouched, its neck weaving, wings stretching as it readied itself for a lunge.

Then something big and dark struck the ground. A rush of air threw the vargit sideways and knocked Moon flat on his back.

He looked up, and up, at the creature from the sky-island.

It looked bigger from this angle, more than three times his size, but it was hard to focus on. He got an impression of sinuous movement from a long tail, spines or tentacles bristling around its head, a long narrow body standing upright, with a broad chest to support the giant wings. Then it moved, fast.

One big-clawed hand reached past Moon, caught the chain, and snapped it in half. Run, Moon thought in shock, scrambling to his feet to bolt away.

A blow to his back slammed him to the ground, a weight held him there. He struggled, twisting around; the creature had one clawed

hand pinning him to the dirt. The other hand wrapped around the stunned vargit's torso, gripping it securely.

From the trees, Dargan shouted, and half a dozen arrows struck the creature's scales. It lifted the struggling vargit and tossed it toward the jungle. Moon couldn't see where it landed but the startled screams of the Cordans and the broken crashing of underbrush were a good indication. Moon had a moment to wonder if the creature was going to throw him, too, and if he could survive it as well as the vargit evidently had. Then the hand pinning him adjusted its grip, wrapping firmly around his waist. Moon wrenched at its claws in desperation, knowing it was going to snap him in half.

Then it snatched him up off the ground and dragged him up against its chest. He felt the big muscles in its body gather, then it leapt into the air.

Moon yelled in pure, frightened reflex, muffled against the creature's scales. Air rushed past him, cold and harsh; when he twisted his head, he could only get a view of the joins where the creature's wings met its body. He knew they were high in the air, and it was terrifying. He had never flown except under his own power, and he had to fight down nausea.

They flew a long time, at least long enough to leave the valley, though it was hard for Moon to judge. The air was freezing. He tried to concentrate on breathing, not what was going to happen when the creature landed. Its scales were thick but overlapped smoothly, not unlike Moon's other form. It was hard to tell how tough they were. Moon growled silently and wished for his claws.

He was shivering and nearly numb from the cold when the creature slowed, and he recognized from its change in angle that it was cupping its wings, getting ready to land. It adjusted its grip on him, and Moon twisted his head, squinting against the wind. He caught a glimpse of a square stone tower with sloping sides, perched on the edge of a river gorge. Then they dipped down toward it.

The creature landed on the tower's broad, flat roof, and released Moon onto dirty stone flags. His shaky legs gave way and he sat down hard. It loomed over him, dark and sinuous and still hard to focus on, even this close. Moon dug his heels into the paving, scrambled away from it, and hissed in defiant reflex. It had brought him up here to tear him apart, but he wasn't going down easy.

His vision flickered, as if the dark form was suddenly made of mist and smoke. Then it was gone and a man stood in its place, a tall, lean man with gray hair and strong features, his face lined and

weathered. He was dressed in gray.

Moon stared, breathing hard. Then he lunged for the man's throat. The burst of renewed fury only got him to his feet; the man stepped back out of reach and Moon collapsed to his hands and knees.

Between one heartbeat and the next, the man shifted. The great dark form crouched, spreading its wings. Moon flinched back, but it jumped into the air. Wincing against the sudden windstorm of dirt, he saw it soar out and down, vanishing over the side of the battlement.

Another shifter. Moon swore and sat back, rubbing sweat and dirt out of his eyes. The manacle was still on his wrist, the chain dangling. I can't believe this.

He looked around. The tower was a ruin, cold wind tearing across it. The stone was cracked and dirt filled the chinks, weeds sprouted everywhere. He didn't see any way down, no doorway into the structure below.

The battlement had rounded crenellations, blocking his view. He stumbled awkwardly to his feet; lingering weakness from the poison made him dizzy. Weaving from side to side, he made it to the battlement, aiming for a spot where one of the crenellations had broken and fallen away. Digging sore fingers into the crumbling rock, he dragged himself up enough to see. The tower stood on the edge of a gorge, surrounded by rock-clinging trees and vegetation, mountains rising all around. Then he looked down.

A long way down. The tower was hundreds of paces high, and though the sides were slanted, they were still far too steep to climb. If Moon had had his claws and wasn't half dead, he could have done it. Of course, if he had his claws, he would have his wings and this wouldn't be a problem. He tried to shift again, just in case the poison had miraculously worn off in the last few moments.

"Don't fall."

Moon's lips curled into a snarl. He looked back, leaning into the wall to support himself. The shifter stood behind him. His voice a dry croak, Moon said, "You think that's funny."

The shifter just held out a small waterskin made of some bright blue hide. It took Moon a moment to realize the shifter expected him to drink from it. He shook his head. "That's how I got into this."

The shifter lifted gray brows, then shrugged. He tilted the skin back and took a drink. "It's just water."

Piss in your water, Moon started to say, then realized the words weren't coming out in Altanic or Kedaic, or in any of the other

common groundling languages. They were both speaking a language Moon knew in his bones, but hadn't heard since he was a boy. It was too strange, another shock on top of everything else. He just said, "What do you want?"

The shifter watched him, his expression opaque. His eyes were blue, but the right one was clouded and its pupil didn't focus. "Just trying to help," he said. The even tone of his voice gave nothing away.

Moon grimaced, unimpressed. "You tried to kill me on the sky-island."

"I tried to catch you," the shifter corrected pointedly. "I just wanted a closer look." His gaze flicked over Moon, assessing. He's old, Moon thought, not sure what it was about the man that gave it away. Far older than his groundling form looked. Everything about him was faded to gray, skin, hair, clothes. He wore a loose shirt with the sleeves rolled up, pants of some tougher material, a heavy leather belt with a pouch and knife sheath. The man said, "I'm Stone, of the Indigo Cloud Court."

Moon pushed away from the battlement, still weaving on his feet. He had never heard of the place, if it was a place. "Are you going to kill me, or just leave me up here?"

"I thought neither." Stone stepped away, turning to cross back over the roof. A heavy leather pack lay on the dirty paving, and a pile of broken branches and chunks of log. Stone must have had the pack stashed somewhere lower in the tower, and that casually spectacular shift and dive had been to retrieve it and the wood. "What did they give you?"

"They said it was a poison that only works on Fell." Moon followed him warily. He had met other shifters before. He had run into a group in Cient that could shift into big lupine predators; they had tried to eat him, too. He had never found or heard of any shifters who could fly. Except the Fell. But Stone wasn't Fell. You didn't think he was a shifter, either, he reminded himself. "I'm not a Fell."

Stone's brows quirked. "I noticed." He sat on his heels, breaking up the wood to lay a fire. He was barefoot, like Moon. "Poison for Fell? I've never heard of that before."

Moon eased himself down to sit a few paces away, wincing at the tug of pain in his back and shoulder. The battlement provided a little protection from the cold wind, but the thin fabric of his sweat-soaked clothes, fine for the warmer valley, was worse than inadequate here. If Stone didn't kill him before the poison wore off—if the poison wore off... Brows knit, Moon looked down at his arms, still showing the

ghost-pattern of scales just under the bronze tint of his skin. Oh, I get it now, he thought sourly. Just trying to help. Right.

“Why did they stake you out?” Stone broke up twigs for tinder. “Catch you stealing their cattle?”

Moon thought over possible replies, trying not to huddle in on himself against the wind. He could sit here and say nothing, but talking might distract Stone. He tried to answer, and had to clear his throat. “I was living with them. They found out what I was.”

Stone flicked a look at him and held out the waterskin again. The slosh of the water inside made Moon’s dry throat burn. He gave in and, without taking his eyes off Stone, took a long drink, then coughed and wiped his mouth. The lukewarm water soothed his throat a little. He tied the bone cap back on and set it aside.

Stone tried to light the fire. He shielded the tinder with larger pieces of wood, striking sparks off a set of flints, just like anyone else. Moon tried to reconcile this picture with the creature that had tossed the giant vargit into the Cordans. Frustrated curiosity getting the better of caution, he asked, “What are you?”

Stone glanced at him from under skeptical brows. “Did you get hit on the head?” Moon didn’t respond, and after a moment Stone’s expression turned thoughtful. He said, “I’m a Raksura. So are you.”

“I’m—” Moon started, then realized he had no way to finish that sentence. He had never known where he came from or what his people were called. And he speaks the language your mother taught you. Moon didn’t want to believe it. But if it was a ploy, it was a patently bizarre one. He’s trying to make me think he didn’t bring me up here to kill me, or... He had no idea. Moon settled for saying skeptically, “Then why are you so much bigger than me?”

“I’m old.” Stone frowned at him, as if Moon was the one who sounded crazy. “What court are you from? Where’s your colony?”

Moon debated a moment, weighing the tactic of implying that there were others who would come to his aid versus the possibility of being tortured to reveal their location. No, it wasn’t worth it. He admitted, “It was just my mother, and my brothers and sister. Dead, a long time ago.”

Stone winced, and turned his attention back to the fire. Once the tinder and the smaller twigs had caught, he sat back, carefully feeding in broken branches. “This happened somewhere further east? Around the curve of the gulf of Abascene?”

It had to be a guess. It was just a very good guess. “Further than

that.”

“There were a few courts that went that far east. I thought they all failed and went back into the reaches, but maybe not.” Stone poked at the tinder thoughtfully. “This woman you call your mother. She was the reigning queen?”

Moon eyed him. “No,” he said, slowly, not trying to conceal his opinion that this was a crazy question. “We lived in a tree.”

Stone just looked annoyed. “What did she look like?”

Does he think he knew her? Moon thought, incredulous. At least trying to see where this was going helped take his mind off the cold and his impending death. “Like me.” He remembered he was a groundling at the moment with a scale pattern under his skin, and clarified, “When she shifted, she was like my other... me. With wings. And she was dark brown, with red under her scales.”

Stone shook his head, leaning over to untie the pack’s laces and rummage in it. “She wasn’t your mother.”

Moon pressed his lips together to hold back his first knee-jerk response, then looked away. It was stupid to get into a pointless argument with someone who was planning to kill you.

Stone pulled out a small cooking pot, battered but embossed with figures in a lighter metal around the rim. “Flighted females with those colors are warriors, and they can’t breed. Only queens and Arbora females are fertile.” Moon’s face must have reflected extreme doubt, because Stone added with a trace of exasperation, “Don’t look at me. We’re Raksura. That’s how it works.”

Moon stared at the fire, trying to keep his expression noncommittal. He couldn’t tell if Stone really did believe that Moon was a Raksura, or if he was just trying to get his confidence. The first option made his skin creep. The second... at least made sense. He wants you to sit here, thinking nothing’s going to happen, until the poison wears off.

Stone filled the pot from the waterskin and put it at the edge of the fire to warm. “This warrior, she didn’t say where you came from?”

“No.”

Stone’s gaze sharpened. “She didn’t tell you anything?”

Moon folded his arms and looked away. Talking had been a bad idea.

“She probably stole you.”

Moon set his jaw. It's not enough that he's going to eat you; he's got to insult your dead mother.

With more heat, Stone added, "She didn't even tell you how to reproduce, that's—"

That stung him to a reply. "I was a child. Reproducing wasn't exactly a concern."

Stone watched him a moment, then turned to rummage in his pack again. "Oh, that young." He pulled out a leather-wrapped packet. "There were four others? Younger than you?"

Moon eyed him narrowly, not sure how Stone knew that. "Yes."

Stone heard his unspoken question. "It was a guess. There's usually five in a clutch. They had wings?"

"No." Through the first long turns alone, finding places to shelter, hunting for food, trying not to become prey for something else, all Moon could think about was how much better it would have been if the others were still with him. The isolation had driven him to seek out groundling settlements—disastrously, at first. He had gotten better at that. He had thought he had gotten better at it. The events of the last day or so would suggest otherwise. He let out his breath in resignation. "Just me."

Stone nodded. He opened the leather packet, took out a dark cake of pressed tea, and scraped off a portion into the steaming water. "Raksura without wings are called Arbora. The females are fertile, and they can give birth to both Arbora and warriors." He shook his head, admitting, "I don't know how that works. A mentor explained it to me once but that was turns ago and it's complicated. But Arbora are divided up into soldiers, hunters, and teachers. They take care of the colony, raise the children, find food, guard the ground." He shrugged. "Run the place. They're also mentors, but you have to be born with a special talent to be a mentor." He glanced up, meeting Moon's eyes. "We're Aeriati. We protect the colony."

Moon couldn't stop a bitter snort. "Stop saying 'we.'"

Stone ignored that. He dug a cup out of the pack and said, "You want some of this?"

Moon stared in disbelief. He shook his head incredulously. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"What?" Stone waved the cup in exasperation. "It's tea. You watched me make it."

Moon had thought he could play this game, but he just couldn't

stand it. He pushed away from Stone, stumbled to his feet. “You know, I’d rather you just kill me than talk me to death.”

Stone grimaced in frustration. “If I wanted to kill you—”

“You’re just waiting until the poison wears off. If you eat me while it’s still in me, you won’t be able to shift either.”

Stone slammed the pack down, stood, and shifted.

Moon dodged back, but Stone leapt into the air, caught the wind, banked, and dove away. Moon lost sight of him and pivoted, trying to watch the sky and all sides of the tower at once.

He waited, but Stone didn’t reappear.

Warily, tension making his nerves jump, Moon searched the roof again, looking for another way down. He found what might have originally been a trap door, but the shaft was filled in with rocks and mortar, as if intentionally blocked from below. As if the original inhabitants had tried to wall themselves in. He wondered if any of them had survived, or if the tower was a giant tomb.

Finally, shoulders hunched against the cold, he went back to the fire. He fed in more wood, building it up again. Then he looked through Stone’s pack.

It contained no weapons except for a small, dull fruit-peeling knife. There was another cup with the same design as the kettle, a couple of empty waterskins, and leather packets all of which contained food. And they weren’t even staples, just dried limes, nuts, two more pressed tea cakes, and some broken pieces of sugar cane. Opening a last packet of dark leather, expecting it to be more food, Moon found a heavy bracelet of red gold. Holding it up to the light, he could see designs etched on it, a fluid image like interlinked snakes.

Moon shook his head, baffled at the collection. He wrapped the bracelet up again and tucked it back in with the rest. Whatever Stone was, he didn’t have to pretend to be a groundling; he had few useful supplies for traveling or camping on the ground. And he must be strong enough to stay in his other form for a long time. Is that what he wanted you to see? Stone must have known that Moon would go through the pack or he wouldn’t have left it here. So he’s not lying about coming from some kind of shifter enclave. He had never heard of one, but the Three Worlds was a big place. Though Moon traveled faster and further than a groundling could have, he had only seen a tiny part of it.

Moon sat back and rubbed at the manacle where it chafed his wrist. The wind gusted, scattering sparks from the fire. It was only late

afternoon, but it was getting colder. Even if he managed to get away from Stone, he could only fly so far in one day, only stay in his other form so long. His oiled skin coat and hood were back at his tent in the Cordans' camp, with everything else he owned, like the good steel hunting and skinning knives he had traded for at the Carthas forge. Not counting the things he had gotten from the Cordans, there were his flints, his waterskins, blankets, and the bow and quiver he kept for show, to explain his success at hunting. Some of it he didn't need when he wasn't living as a groundling. But he would have to make his way through these mountains with nothing.

The whoosh of air warned him; Moon looked up to see Stone high in the air, drawing nearer to the tower. Moon just had time to stand and back away from the fire. Stone swooped in and dropped a carcass on the paving, a creature nearly as big as a kras, with thick oily skin and flippers instead of hooves.

Stone landed lightly on his feet, then shifted back to groundling. He waved toward the dead creature, still exasperated. "That's what I'm planning to eat. You? From what I can see, you're mostly skin and bones."

He had a point there, but Moon demanded, "Then what do you want from me?"

Stone paced toward the fire, frowning down at it. The impatience was gone from his voice when he said, "I want you to come with me, back to my court."

That... wasn't what Moon was expecting. It took him a moment to realize he had heard Stone right. "What for?"

His gaze still on the fire, Stone said, "I've been looking for warriors to join us. Our last generation... didn't produce enough. I've been at a colony to the east, the Star Aster Court. But I couldn't talk any of them into coming back with me." He glanced up, his face a little wry. "You've got somewhere else you want to go?"

Moon woke slowly, his body sluggish and his brain reluctant to face whatever was going to happen next. He couldn't hear Ilane or Selis' deep breathing, or the camp waking up around him. He was curled on his side, head pillowed on his arm, stiff and aching from lying on dirt-encrusted paving, but it was pleasantly warm. He rubbed his face and squinted up at the tent stretching over him—He went still, suddenly wide awake. Not a tent. It was a wing. Stone's wing. That's right. Yesterday your friends tried to murder you. The manacle was still around his wrist, the skin under it rubbed raw.

Moon rolled onto his back and stared up at Stone's wing. With the

morning light glowing through it, the dark, scaly membrane shone with a faint red tint. He hadn't seen anybody else's wings since his mother had been killed. This close he could see scars, old healed-over rents where the scales had been torn. The front edge of the wing still looked razor-sharp, but the skin folded over the joints was hard and gnarled where Moon's was still smooth. Hopefully still smooth, if he could shift.

They had spent the night on top of the tower, not talking very much. Moon still had no idea how to reply to Stone's offer, if Stone was even serious about it. Stone had stated that he was tired of arguing and they would talk about it in the morning when he hoped Moon would be less crazy. After some sleep, Moon was willing to admit that he had been a little hysterical, but it had been a hard day.

But it's over. I hope. Moon bit his lip and looked at his hands. The faint outline of scales wasn't visible, at least in this light. He pressed a thumb to the skin of his forearm, forcing the blood away, but still couldn't see anything. All right. That's good. He knew why he was reluctant. If he tried and nothing happened... Putting it off wasn't helping. He took a deep breath, and tried to shift.

He felt the change gather in his chest. There might have been a hesitation or it might have been his fear. Then he felt his bones lighten and his scales scrape against the paving, the weight of his folded wings, his tail. He curled up on himself for a moment, relief washing over him in a heady wave.

From the deep, steady breathing, Stone was still asleep, or doing a good imitation of it. Moon crawled to the edge of the big wing, then wriggled out from under it.

Once free, he stood and stretched, shaking out his spines and frills. The morning light was bright on the snow-capped mountains, the air chill and crisp. Nothing had disturbed the roof of the tower while they slept except a few brave carrion birds picking at the remnants of the riverbeast carcass.

The manacle was still on Moon's wrist. He hooked his claws under the lock, wincing as the metal ground into his scales. He exerted careful pressure until the lock snapped and fell away.

Moon crossed the pavement and leapt to the battlement, digging his claws into the crumbling stone. He looked down at the dizzyingly steep drop to the rock below. Then he unfolded his wings and dove.

He flew up and down the gorge, stretching his wings, fighting the gusty wind and feeling the sun heat his scales. The exercise made him hungry.

He rode the air currents down to the river, which rushed over tumbled rocks in its shallow stretches, then turned calm where the channel was wide and deep. Moon plunged into water that would have been shockingly cold in his groundling form, and swam along the bottom. He found a slow-moving school of fish, each nearly three paces long with thick, heavy bodies and trailing iridescent fins. He snatched one and shot up into the air again.

There hadn't been much point in seriously considering Stone's offer when he hadn't known whether the poison had ruined him permanently or not. Now... Moon found himself thinking about it. Long ago he had given up looking for his own people, assuming if there were any others, they were lost somewhere in the vastness of the Three Worlds, not to be found except by wild accident. Now the wild accident had actually happened.

But going with Stone meant trusting him. Moon would be putting himself in the middle of a large group of shifters, and while he might be a Raksura, he knew nothing about what they were like. If they turned out to be as murderous and violent as the Fell, he could find himself trapped and fighting for his life.

Another option was to look for another groundling settlement to join, which meant starting over again, with all new pitfalls and hazards. What he wanted most at the moment was to fly off alone to hunt and explore, with no other people to make him constantly wary. He was sick of growing to like and trust groundlings like the Cordans, and knowing it all meant nothing if they found out what he was.

But he was sick of being alone, too. He had done this all before, resolving to live alone only to become desperate for company, any company, after a few changes of the month.

He was on his fifth fish when he surfaced and saw he wasn't alone. Stone, in groundling form, sat on a big flat rock by the bank. He leaned back, propped on his arms, face tipped up to the sun. Deliberate and unhurried, Moon slapped his fish against a rock to kill it, finished eating, then went back in the water to wash the guts off his scales. He surfaced again in the shallows, below where Stone sat, and used the sandy bottom to clean his claws.

Still sunning himself, Stone said, "You're not supposed to do that, you know. Raksura don't."

"Raksura don't bathe?" Moon said dryly, deliberately misunderstanding. He shook water out of his wings, spraying the bank. "That's going to be a problem."

Stone sat up to give him an ironic look. "Yes, we bathe. We don't

fish. Not like that.”

Moon climbed up onto the rock and sat to the side so he could keep his wings unfolded and let them dry. The sun was warm but the wind was still cold, and if he switched back to groundling form now, the water still on his scales would soak his clothes. “Why don’t you fish?”

“I don’t know. Probably never had a good place for it.” Stone squinted at him. “So. I’ve got one other court to visit before I head home. Are you coming with me?”

Moon looked across the river. Small swimming lizards stretched out on the rocks across the bank, waiting for them to leave so they could go after the remains of Moon’s fish. “If you were looking for Raksura, why did you come to the valley?”

Stone didn’t seem disconcerted by the question. “It was on my way back. I stopped to rest, caught a scent of something that turned out to be you. It was faint because you were in groundling form.” He shrugged. “Thought I’d stay on a few days to look around, see if there was a small colony there that I hadn’t heard about.”

Moon hadn’t been able to scent Stone. But that might just mean that Stone’s senses, like his shifted form, were stronger and more powerful. And it was beyond strange, talking to someone while Moon was in his other form; he had forgotten how different his own voice sounded, deeper and more raspy. He liked not having to hide.

He let his breath out, frustrated. Agreeing to go with Stone wasn’t a commitment to stay in his colony. If Moon let this chance go by, he knew he would regret it. He said, “I’ll come with you.”

Moon couldn’t tell if Stone was relieved. Stone just nodded, and said, “Good.”

Chapter Three

It turned out that, despite appearances, Stone was in a hurry. The other colony he wanted to visit was to the west, which he said was on the way back to the Indigo Cloud Court. He and Moon flew down the river gorge, riding the strong wind that flowed above it, then turned to cross the mountains. They passed more ruined towers standing on the rocky cliffs like sentinels, but no inhabited settlements.

Moon suspected that Stone could have easily made twice the distance, but he seemed content to glide along at Moon's fastest pace. Moon was just glad Stone didn't press to go faster; he was used to spending most of the day as a groundling, and it had been more than half a turn since he had stayed in his other form so long, or flown this far at one time. By afternoon, his back ached as if he had been hauling rocks all day. At least it distracted him from thinking about the Cordans. Every thought of Ilane was like poking an open wound, but he hoped Selis was all right, that she had found a home or at least someone to live with whom she could tolerate.

As the sun set, they finally stopped to rest in a ridge where the rock formed a sheltered hollow. Heavily overhung by trees on the rise above, it looked down on the terraced steps of the forest below. Moon climbed in, shifted back to groundling, and collapsed in an exhausted heap.

Stone landed on the ledge, shifted, ducked inside, and dropped his pack. He stretched, not looking any more fatigued than he had this morning. "It's a little chilly in here."

Moon snorted. "A little." The hollow was screened from the wind bending the tops of the spiny trees, but the sun had never penetrated back here, and the rock radiated cold like a block of ice. It was also small. "There's not much room for a fire." Not that he was eager to get up and look for a better spot.

Stone sat on his heels to rummage through his pack. "We're not staying that long. I want to get moving again soon."

Moon growled under his breath but didn't argue; if Stone wanted

to test him, fine. And he didn't want to stay in these mountains any longer than they had to, either. He curled up into a huddle, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. To distract himself, and to try to get some understanding of Stone's route, he asked, "Why didn't you stop at the other colony on the way east?"

"Sky Copper has always been small. I knew they weren't likely to have any spare warriors. I need to talk to them about something else." Stone found a ratty, dark colored bundle in his pack that Moon had assumed was just cushioning for the kettle. Apparently it was a blanket. "And the mentors said the best chance was to go to Star Aster." His expression turned preoccupied. "Or toward Star Aster. Maybe they said 'toward.'"

Moon put that together with Stone's earlier comment, that it took special talent to be a mentor. "The mentors are shamen?" He had often had bad luck with shamen. They were either worthless or immediately suspicious of him.

"Augurs, mostly, and healers," Stone corrected, still preoccupied as he spread out the blanket. He lay down and shoved his pack into place as a pillow. "Come on, get some rest." He patted the other half of the blanket, offering it to Moon.

Moon didn't move. He still found Stone nearly impossible to read. Not that he had been able to read Ilane, either. "I'm not sleeping with you." If this was going to be a problem, he wanted to find out now, before he spent any more long, miserable days fighting headwinds.

Stone lifted a brow, deeply amused. "I have great-grandchildren older than you." He pointed to a white seam on his elbow. "You see this scar? That's older than you."

Moon's eyes narrowed in annoyance, but he wondered if that was true. He hadn't been keeping close track, but he knew roughly that it had been around thirty-five turns of the seasonal cycle since his family had been killed. That made him old for some groundling races and young for others. If Stone was really that old, and Moon was really the same species...If this doesn't work out, you're going to be spending a lot of time alone.

He edged over and eased down next to Stone. The blanket looked shabby but it was thick and well made; it didn't soften the rock but it kept the cold at bay. Rolling on his side, facing away from Moon, Stone said, "I'll try not to molest you in my sleep."

"Bastard," Moon muttered. He would have retreated to the other end of the cleft in a huff, but Stone seemed to put out almost as much body heat as a groundling as he did in his other form. Still annoyed,

Moon fell asleep.

It was deep into the night and Moon was curled against Stone's back, when Stone thumped him with an elbow and said it was time to go.

The mountains stretched on and on, but even when the clouds gathered and they flew through cold mist that was like breathing wet wool, there was no question of getting lost. Moon had always known which way due south was, could feel it as if it pulled at his bones. From the way Stone confidently soared through the thick clouds, never veering from their course, Moon thought he must have a similar ability.

For the next few days, they flew by day and by night, stopping only briefly to sleep and hunt the sparse game. Moon had seen several different breeds of mountain grasseaters but they were all boney and lean, and didn't make for satisfying meals. Though the long flights were exhausting, Moon quickly gained stamina. But the part of the day he looked forward to the most was before they slept, when Stone asked him questions about where he had lived, how far he had traveled, what he had seen. With more tact than Moon would have given him credit for, he didn't mention the Cordans.

It was strange to talk about the places Moon had been without having to carefully avoid anything that had to do with flying or shifting. In return, Stone talked about flying over the sea realms, seeing the shapes of white coral towers just below the waves, the flickering tails of merrow-people and waterlings as they fled his shadow. It was dangerous to go out over the seas, with nowhere to land if you ran into a storm or grew too tired to go on; it was even more risky to swim in the deeps, where creatures far larger than the biggest land predators lived. Moon had never ventured much past the coastal islands to the south, and found it fascinating to hear what lay further out.

By twilight on the fifth day, they came to the fringes of the mountains, where the sharp peaks tumbled gradually down into green hills and rocky outcrops were cut through with narrow, rushing streams. This time Stone picked out a grassy ledge wide enough for a fire, though it was warmer down here than on the upper slopes. Moon suspected he just wanted to make tea. When Moon brought back a bundle of deadfall collected from the brush in the ravines, he found Stone shifted to groundling, with a big, woolly grasseater carcass steaming in the cool air and a rock hearth already built.

After they ate, Moon stretched out on his stomach, basking in the warm firelight, the cool turf soft against his groundling skin,

comfortably full of grasseater and tea. From somewhere distant, he heard a roar, edged like a bell and so far away it almost blended with the wind. He slanted a look at Stone to see if they had to worry.

“Skylings, mountain wind-walkers.” Stone sat by the fire, breaking sticks up into small pieces and absently tossing them into the flames. “They live too far up in the air to notice us.”

Moon rolled onto his side to squint suspiciously up at the sky. The stars were bright, streaked with clouds. “Then what do they eat?”

“Other skylings, tiny ones, no bigger than gnats. They make swarms big enough to mistake for clouds.” As Moon tried to picture that, Stone asked, “Did you ever look for other shifters?”

Stone hadn’t asked about this before, and Moon wanted to avoid the subject. Looking for his own people had led him into more trouble than anything else. “For awhile. Then I stopped.” He shrugged, as if it was nothing. “I couldn’t search the whole Three Worlds.”

“And the warrior you were with didn’t tell you which court, or the name of the queen, or anyone in your line?” Stone sounded distinctly irritated. “She didn’t even give you a hint?”

Moon corrected him pointedly, “No, my mother didn’t tell me anything.”

Stone sighed, poking at the fire. Moon got ready for an argument, but instead Stone asked, “How did she and the Arbora die?”

That wasn’t a welcome subject either. It was like an old wound that had never quite stopped bleeding. Moon didn’t want to talk about the details, but he owed Stone some kind of an answer. He propped his chin on his arms and looked out into the dark. “Tath killed them.”

Tath were reptilian groundlings, predators, and they had surrounded the tree Moon’s family had been sleeping in. He remembered waking, confused and terrified, as his mother tossed him out of the nest. He had realized later that she had picked him because he was the only other one who could fly, the only one who had a chance to escape while she stayed to defend the others.

He had been too young to fly well, and had crashed down through the branches, tumbling nearly to the ground, within reach of the Tath waiting below. One had snatched at him and Moon had clawed its eyes, struggling away. He had half-flown, half-climbed through the trees back up to the nest. But his mother and the others were all dead, torn to pieces.

If he had realized how hard living without them would be, he would have let the Tath catch him. He just said, “It happened... fast.”

They were both silent for a time, listening to the fire crackle. Moon had the feeling that Stone was as uncomfortable offering sympathy as Moon was reluctant to accept it. He wasn't surprised when Stone tossed a last stick into the fire, dusted his hands, and veered off the subject completely. "Do you know why it's called the Three Worlds?"

Moon relaxed again, settling down into the turf, relieved to be on safer ground. "Three continents." It was a wild guess. Moon had never seen a map big enough to show more than the immediate area.

"Three realms: sea, earth, and sky. Everyone remembers the sea realms, but they've forgotten the sky realms. It's been so many generations since the island peoples fought among themselves. They're mostly gone now, with no one left to tell the stories."

Moon wondered if he had been right about the sky-islands all along. "Is that where we're from?"

His gaze distant, Stone said, "No. We've always come from the earth."

At dawn they flew out across the grassland, where old pillars stuck up out of the ground, part of an ancient scattered roadway or aqueduct. So many peoples had come and gone from the Three Worlds that it was littered with their remnants.

By afternoon they found an intact road, cutting through the ocean of tall green grass, more than a hundred paces wide and built of the same white stone as the broken pillars. As the day darkened toward evening, they spotted a groundling caravan traveling upon it.

The caravan included box wagons, heavily carved of dark wood, pulled by large, shaggy draughtbeasts with substantial horns. It had stopped and was preparing to camp for the night, with the groundlings unharnessing the beasts, putting up tents, building cook fires.

Moon and Stone flew high enough that the groundlings hadn't noticed them. They both blended in with the twilight sky, but Moon banked to give the camp wide berth anyway. He doubted the caravan had weapons that could do any damage at this distance, but there was no point in frightening them. Then he saw Stone circling down, heading for a landing in the tall grass some distance from the edge of the road. Is he out of his mind? he thought, startled.

Stone dropped into a low spot at an angle to the road, so swift and silent the groundlings probably hadn't seen him.

Moon went down as fast as he could, alighting in the flattened

grass that marked Stone's landing site. Stone had already shifted to groundling and stretched extravagantly, rolling his shoulders. The grass around them was as tall as a small tree, standing well above their heads. Moon shifted, demanding, "What are you doing?"

Stone gave him a pointed look, as if the answer was obvious. "I want the news. They're Sericans, probably coming from Kish."

"What, you're just going to walk up to them?" Moon had trouble believing he was serious.

Stone lifted a brow. "I could stand on the roadside and try to signal, but—"

Moon shook his head incredulously. "They're going to know what we are. How many groundlings do you see wandering around out here?"

"Maybe fifty or sixty, judging by the wagons." Stone shouldered his pack and explained patiently, "These people travel long distances, and they see a lot of strange things. Some of them will suspect we're different. As long as they don't feel threatened, they won't act on it."

It still sounded crazy. Moon had approached groundlings like this before, but only after making certain he didn't look like anything but another traveler, even if it meant landing a day's walk or more away. "What if you're wrong?"

Stone started away through the grass. "I've been wrong before," he admitted, not helpfully.

Moon reluctantly trailed him to the edge of the road. It was built up more than ten paces high, more of a causeway through the grassland, something that hadn't been apparent from the air. Crumbling sets of steps had been built at intervals, half-buried in the grass; whatever they led to was long vanished. Stone climbed the nearest and started across toward the camp. Still expecting disaster, Moon crouched uneasily at the edge of the road.

The wagons were arranged in a half-circle, and the camp smelled of wood smoke, incense, and onion roots frying in nut oil. The groundlings had blue skin, a much darker blue than Kavath's, and their hair was black. They wore bright colors, long coats and pantaloons of red or blue or dark green, embroidered and trimmed with gold or black braid. They had spears, and short bows that looked as if they were made of horn. The furry draughtbeasts shook their hides and lowed as Stone approached.

Several men came out to greet him, warily at first, but they seemed to grow easier as he spoke to them. The wind carried their

voices away but Moon could hear fragments. The head drover, speaking Altanic, asked if they were from Kaupi or Loros, and Stone replied only that they were travelers, heading west. Finally they took Stone into the camp to sit by the fire with an older man who was probably their leader. Moon saw the man's sharp eyes glance his way, and heard him say, "The young one is skittish?"

"That's putting it mildly," Stone answered.

Moon noticed he didn't accept the caravaners' offers of food and drink. In turn, the caravaners refused Stone's offer of a pressed tea cake from his pack. Moon watched the old man watch Stone. He knows, and the thought made Moon's nerves itch. Only two of them out here, Moon without even a bag to carry food, fighting their way through the grass rather than walking on the road. The groundling knew he was sitting there at his fire with something strange, not just a man from a different race. But he seemed to be intrigued rather than frightened. How Stone could do this, Moon didn't understand.

He hasn't been alone forever, hasn't been hunted, Moon thought. Maybe the caravaners felt it, and it made them unafraid. Of course, Stone could shift in an eye blink, and those arrows would do little damage to his hide.

Maybe Moon had just been doing it wrong all this time. Living in the wrong part of the Three Worlds, approaching groundlings in the wrong way, living a deception he couldn't maintain. After a time, people sensed he was lying, and assumed he meant them harm. I don't know. He sighed and rubbed his gritty eyes and wished Stone would hurry.

The women came over to sit by the fire and join the conversation. They wore the same clothes as the men, their breasts bare under the open coats, their hair worn straight and unbound to the waist. After a time, some of the younger girls even ventured to the edge of the camp, trying to coax Moon over. He sidled away along the wall when they came closer than twenty paces. Someone called them back and they retreated, giggling, the bells sewn into their clothes chiming as they ran.

Stone left them not long after night fell, coming back to the wall where Moon waited. "Was there news?" Moon asked, sounding deliberately skeptical. He unfolded his legs and jumped down off the road.

Stone took the steps. "There are rumors of Fell along the inland sea. They haven't seen any, but they know caravaners and shipmasters who won't go any further east than Demi now." He sounded

thoughtful. “For a couple of generations it seemed like they were dying out up this way. But now they’re moving around again, more active than they’ve been for twenty turns.”

Moon had never heard of Demi, which just told him how well and truly lost he was. He shrugged uncomfortably. “There’s Fell everywhere,” he said, as they walked away into the grass.

A few days later, Moon broke down and asked why Stone thought his mother had stolen him.

They sat on top of a broken pillar at least a hundred paces high and wider than one of the Sericans’ big wagons, listening to the wind rustle the tall grass. It was a comfortable perch for the night; dirt and grass had collected on the rough surface, making a soft carpet to sleep on. Moon could see hills in the distance, dark outlines against the star-filled sky; Stone had said Sky Copper lay among them and that they would reach it in another day or so.

Stone said slowly, “There’s what’s called a royal clutch. Five female Aeriats, born at the same time. As they grow into fledglings, one or two or three turn into queens and the rest become warriors. Sometimes the ones that turn out to be warriors... don’t get over the disappointment. It makes them do crazy things, sometimes. Like leave their court, steal clutches, or... other things.” He stirred a little uncomfortably, admitting, “It might have been something else. Sometimes colonies fail, and there were never many Raksura that far east where you were living. She could have been a survivor, trying to find somewhere to go.”

Moon thought it over, looking off across the plain. Insects sang in the dark, and the day’s heat still hung in the air. Further away, he could hear movement in the grass, low growls, carrion hunters coming for the carcass of the big furry grasseater they had eaten earlier. He had noticed that the big predators kept their distance; he thought there was something about Stone, even in groundling form, that warned them off.

Moon tried to remember if there had been any hint that his mother was running from something, or to something. It was long ago, and as a boy he hadn’t paid much attention to anything but playing and learning to fly and hunt. But he knew she hadn’t been crazy. And talking about it any more was pointless. “What makes queens so different?”

Stone stretched out on the grass and folded his hands on his chest, seeming content with the change of subject. “They have a color pattern to their scales, and their spines are longer. When they shift,

they lose their wings, but they look more like Arbora than groundlings. They keep their claws, tails, some of their spines.”

That was a strange thought, not being able to shift all the way to groundling. But it didn’t sound like queens could do much more than female warriors, except make more queens. “So what makes them special?” he asked, just to provoke Stone.

“Queens hold the court together. And they have a power that mentors don’t,” Stone explained patiently. “If you’re close enough to her, a queen can keep you from shifting.”

Is he serious? Moon thought, appalled. He stirred uneasily, scratching at the gnat bites on his thigh, trying to conceal his reaction. “Even you?”

Stone lifted his brows. “Even me.”

He was serious. “Are there a lot of them?”

Stone frowned, as if this question was somehow loaded with meaning. “In Indigo Cloud, just the two. The reigning queen and the young one. There should be more, at least a clutch of sister queens to support the reigning queen. But we’ve had bad luck.”

Two. That didn’t sound so bad. Moon should be able to avoid them. If he couldn’t, he wouldn’t stay at the colony. But he was getting used to being with Stone, flying with him, hunting as a team, talking without having to conceal anything. Used enough to it that he would miss it when it was gone.

Stone was watching him again, his gaze opaque, and not just because of his bad eye. Moon wondered if his own thoughts had shown on his face. But Stone just asked, “What was her name, the warrior who said she was your mother?”

Moon hesitated. He didn’t see a reason not to tell. “Sorrow.”

Stone sighed in that particular tone Moon was beginning to recognize. “What?” Moon demanded.

“Nothing,” Stone told him with a shrug. “I just wouldn’t give one of my kids a name like that. It’s asking for trouble.”

“You really have kids.” He was a little surprised. Stone had made that crack about great-grandchildren earlier, but Moon had thought he was making it up.

“Quite a few, over the turns.” Stone fixed his gaze on the sky, narrowing his eyes. “I’m bringing my great-great-granddaughter a present.”

He must mean the gold bracelet in his pack. Moon had assumed he had brought it along to trade in case he needed something from a groundling settlement, but this made more sense. Moon started to ask another question, but noticed Stone's eyes were closed.

Frustrated, Moon stretched out in the grass and looked up at the night, crowded with stars. At least seeing the Sky Copper Court would give him some idea of what to expect at Indigo Cloud, though Stone had said it was smaller. You won't know what it's like until you get there. Worrying about it won't help. Telling himself that didn't help either.

It was late the next afternoon when they reached the end of the plain, where big rolling hills were covered with scrubby brush and short wind-twisted trees turned red and gold by the sunset. Their shadows startled herds of large, horned grasseaters with brown fur. When Stone stopped abruptly, flaring his wings out, Moon overshot him.

By the time he banked and returned, Stone had landed on the rocky crest of a hill. Moon landed beside him, breathing hard. It had been a long flight, and the wind hadn't been with them until they reached the hills. "What is it?"

Stone shifted to groundling. He never spoke in his other form. Moon wasn't certain he could. Stone stared into the distance, eyes narrowed, and said, "Something's wrong. Their sentries should have come out to meet us."

Moon turned to squint into the sunset, trying to spot which distant, rounded hill was the colony. "What does—" The rush of air sent him staggering as Stone shifted and surged into flight.

Swearing, Moon leapt after him.

Moon didn't see the colony until he was almost on top of it. The sun sank in the distance, shadows pooling at the hills' feet. The mound was buried among the other hills, but the shape gave it away. It was too even, and the trees formed a series of terraced rings all the way to the top. Closer, and he could see openings carved out of the rock and dirt. What he couldn't see was any movement, except for a lazy circle of dark green carrion birds that fled as they drew near.

Moon followed as Stone circled the mound. Glowing in the golden light of the sunset, the back side was a collapsed jumble of rock and dirt and uprooted trees. No smoke drifted up from it, but he could smell charred wood and flesh.

Stone landed on a terrace below the collapse, folded his wings

back, and just stood there. Moon landed a moment later. The sun baked off the rock and bare dirt; the sweet smell of the white blossoms on the gnarled trees couldn't disguise the stench of death. Moon paced carefully along the edge, digging his claws into the loose dirt, shaking his head in disbelief. He had expected a hundred different things, but he hadn't expected this.

Big broken logs were jammed into the dirt in all different directions. Moon stopped at one, retracting his claws to run his hand over the smooth polished surface. The wood must have been brought from the mountain forests to build the framework that supported the mound. Had supported it. He couldn't see any corpses buried in the dirt, but the stink of decay and the hum of flies told him they were here somewhere.

It obviously wasn't a natural collapse: the uprooted trees and most of the dirt had slid down the outside of the mound. Something dug through from out here, Moon thought uneasily. Possibly several somethings, all Stone's size, or larger. He knew what that meant.

Stone turned and walked along the terrace past Moon, toward the nearest intact opening. Distracted, Moon moved to follow.

The slap from Stone's tail caught him in the shoulder and knocked him down the side of the mound. He tumbled over rocks and slammed painfully into a tree. Dizzy, he looked up in time to see Stone tuck his wings back and slip into the opening.

Damn it, ow. Moon extracted himself from the broken branches of the tree, shook the dirt off, and jumped into the air.

He glided down to the next hill and landed on a big flat rock at the summit. His claws scored the sandy surface, and he saw the whole top of the rock was covered with similar marks; the inhabitants of the colony must have used it as a frequent perch. He tried to imagine this place as it must have been only a short time ago, with dozens of people like him flying in and out of the mound, landing on this rock to watch the sunset. Not anymore.

Weary to the bone, he shifted to groundling. He sat down with a groan and wrapped his arms around his knees, trying to ease the dull ache in his back and shoulders. Well, that's that, he thought sourly.

Stone's rebuff hadn't been necessary; he didn't need to see whatever carnage lay inside the mound to know this had been done by Fell. There were predators big enough to make that hole in the hillside, but they were just animals, and he was certain a group of shifters could have driven one off or killed it.

Moon had suspected the Fell were a factor ever since Stone had said he was looking for more warriors to protect his colony. But suspecting it was one thing; now he was certain.

The rock was still warm from the day's heat and the wind was strong and cool. Far to the west a small storm was gathering, boiling clouds dyed purple by the growing twilight, something else to worry about. Part of Moon wanted to hunt and look for a spring so Stone wouldn't have to do it when he came out, to pretend that nothing had changed so they could go on as they had before, at least until they reached Indigo Cloud. He couldn't believe part of him was that stupid.

He should get out of here before Stone came for him, if he came for him. It would be days and days of travel before he could get back to more familiar territory. Once there, he had no idea. But there were plenty of groundling cities he hadn't been hounded out of yet.

Then the wind changed, and Moon froze.

The Fell were still here.

He pushed to his feet, tasting the air. No, it wasn't his imagination. He snarled under his breath. This day just keeps getting worse.

Moon shifted and jumped off the rock, snapping his wings out to catch the wind.

He circled the mound, studying it more closely. There were more entrances like the one that Stone had vanished through. He landed at one near the top of the mound, across from the collapsed area. The passage slanted down at a near vertical angle, lined with rock. Not far below the edge, a tangle of rope was secured to the side by metal pegs, hanging down until it vanished into the darkness below—a rope ladder, meant for the Arbora, the Raksura who had no wings.

Moon crouched low, tasting the cool air flowing up from deep inside the mound. It carried Stone's now familiar scent, mingled with death and rot and charred wood, all blended with the stench of Fell. Live Fell, not corpses from the battle that must have raged inside. Moon felt his whole body tighten, felt a growl gather in his chest.

He folded his wings back and slid into the passage to catch the ropes and climbed rapidly down.

The rope was made of something like braided hair or silk, not plant fiber. Whatever it was, it was tough enough to resist his claws. Faint light glowed ahead, just enough to change the shade of the darkness and show that the passage opened into a larger chamber. Through his grip on the rope, Moon felt the rock and dirt tremble, as

if somewhere deep in the mound, something heavy slammed into the supporting walls. Idiot, Moon snarled, not sure if he meant himself or Stone or both.

He swung out of the passage, hanging onto the tangle of rope. There was just enough light to make out glimpses of the heavy carved logs braced against the curving walls, supporting a structure of delicate wooden balconies, bridges, galleries, many with tents of some slick material pitched atop them, the colors leached away by the dark. Some galleries were collapsed or hanging drunkenly, with the rope netting that connected them in confused tangles. Wan, yellow illumination came from hanging baskets, too small and faint to provide much light. Moon had seen magic used for light before, objects like bones or wood spelled to glow, though it usually didn't last long, and these must be fading.

He heard rustling, something moving. The sound came from an intact balcony occupied by a half-collapsed tent. Moon spread his wings, half-leaping, half-gliding down to the balcony. He landed amid a mess of broken crockery, uprooted plants, scattered cushions. The tent fabric fluttered as something moved inside. A flap flew up and a Fell leapt out.

It was only a small one, a little shorter than Moon, a minor dakti. It did look somewhat like Moon; he had always understood how terrified groundlings might be confused. But instead of scales it had thicker armored plates on its back and shoulders, and its face was distorted, with a long, animal jaw and a double row of fangs. Its less flexible wings were webbed and leathery, with fewer joints. It had a severed arm clutched in its teeth, a dark limb that made Moon think groundling before he saw the claws on the rigid hand.

The dakti stared at him in blank astonishment, the red-rimmed dark-adapted eyes going wide. Moon grinned and lunged.

It turned to jump off the platform and spat the arm out so it could shriek a warning to the others. Moon was on it before it managed either, landing on its back and slamming it to the wooden floor. It grabbed at his arm, its claws ripping at his scales before he wrenched its head around, snapping its neck. Moon bounced to his feet, listening, but he didn't hear any more movement nearby.

There were three main breeds of Fell, dakti, kethel, and rulers. The rulers were the only ones with the brains to plan a trap; all the others did was follow orders. There had better not be a ruler here, Moon thought, still grimly angry. He stepped to the edge of the balcony and left the minor dakti twitching in its death throes. Or we're already dead.

He leapt off the balcony and down to a bridge, then down again to a curtain of netting, swinging along it to another passage in the floor.

This tunnel was wider, and halfway through it the massive thumping grew louder, shaking the walls, knocking dirt loose from every crack and cranny. Somewhere below, someone growled, a voice he didn't recognize.

Moon dropped out of the passage into a chamber mostly lost in shadow, only a few of the baskets still lit. The stink of charred flesh and wood was suffocating, but it didn't disguise the Fell taint. Moon sensed bodies moving in the dark, frantic motion. He caught the netting with his feet and hung upside down, letting his eyes adjust, trying to pinpoint the movement by sound.

Midway down, a complex grid of log bridges and platforms was strung with rope ladders and trailing fabric. Far below it, in the bottom of the chamber, massive bodies struggled. After a moment he caught the reflected glints off scales, and recognized the pointed spade-shape on the end of Stone's tail whipping up to smash into the wall. Stone was fighting a Fell nearly as big as he was, a major kethel, but Moon had expected that. He couldn't see what the other Fell were doing.

At least half a dozen minor dakti, Moon's size or a little bigger, clustered on two of the supporting logs. It looked like they were working at the join, gnawing and tearing with teeth and claws at the thick ropes that still held it together. The structure was already precarious, broken in enough places to hang drunkenly over... over the bottom well of the chamber, where Stone was occupied by the fight with the big kethel. Good idea, Moon thought.

He meant to just hang here and wait for the right moment, but one of the dakti must have seen him; its warning-shriek hurt his ears. Moon grimaced, annoyed. He didn't want them to stop what they were doing to come up here after him. Fine. We'll do it the hard way, he thought, and dropped for the platform.

He struck one dakti square on the head, knocking it flat, and used it as a springboard to leap on the one that swung to face him. Moon landed on it, bowling it over backwards. It tried to sink its claws into his shoulders and Moon flared his spines to keep it off. He grabbed its wrists, using his feet to rip from its chest down, disemboweling it. He threw the body at the next dakti waiting to leap on him, knocking it off the platform. He rolled to his feet, then staggered as the surface under him jerked. The other three dakti had kept to their job, tearing at the ropes holding the logs in place. The join was giving way. At the

top of his lungs, Moon yelled, “Stone, get out of there!”

The dakti spun to face him, snarling, but the logs shifted, creaking and groaning as the whole structure started to lean. Moon braced to leap, then a sudden whish of air warned him. He flung himself forward, but something hit him from behind, the jolt knocking him flat on the platform.

Moon rolled over to see a major kethel loom over him, glaring down, its breath stinking of old blood and overripe corpses. It looked like the minor dakti but was as big as Stone, and an array of horns stood out around its head. A heavy collar around its neck was hung with groundling skulls. Deep ragged claw marks across its face dripped black ichor. Uh oh, Moon had time to think frantically, digging his claws in to scramble away from it. This wasn’t exactly working out the way he had planned.

Then Stone shot up behind the kethel and landed on its back, claws digging into the joints in its armor to yank it backward. Moon leapt up as the platform gave way under their weight, logs flipped upward, and the whole structure collapsed.

Moon jumped off, snapped out his wings, and beat hard to get high enough to reach another dangling rope net. Clinging to it, he looked back to see the kethel going down under the heavy logs. Stone perched on the wall, sweeping his tail around to knock more logs and debris down after it.

The kethel shrieked one last time, its body twisting in death throes. Moon breathed out in relief and started to climb.

Then from below, he heard a voice, raspy and thick, but still loud enough to carry. “Stone, absent elder of Indigo Cloud!”

His claws hooked in the net, Moon looked back. A dakti was trapped in the broken remnant of the platform, crushed between two logs. Its mouth was open, the voice echoing out from the distended throat. It said, “Is that your get? We thought you too feeble now to breed.”

It was the voice of a Fell ruler, speaking in the Raksuran language through the dying dakti. It knows we’re here. It knows Stone’s name, Moon thought, a chill running through his blood. It’s seen me.

Stone made a noise, a reverberating growl that was more weary annoyance than anger. He reached up and closed his fist around the dakti, crushing it.

Moon twitched to settle his spines, and started to climb again. The instant of panic was gone, and he told himself to be rational. The

groundlings said that what one ruler knew, they all knew, but that couldn't be entirely true. There were different flights of Fell, and they fought each other for territory; surely they wouldn't share knowledge. And yes, a ruler might have seen him through a dakti, but it had been more interested in Stone. It would think Moon was just another Raksura.

On his way back up through the mound he found a wounded dakti taking the same route, caught it, and tore its throat out. At least it didn't try to talk to him.

He climbed out of the top passage into fresh, cool air and twilight, the stars coming out in a sky turning from blue to deep purple. Moon flew back to the rocky perch on the next hill. He was covered with dust and Fell blood, scratched and sore.

The sudden whoosh startled him. Moon hissed and scrambled away, tumbling down the hill. He landed in a clumsy crouch, but when he looked back, Stone was standing on the rock in groundling form. Stone said, "Come here."

Moon hesitated, all too aware that if he wanted to run, he should have done it before now. He couldn't outfly Stone without a good head start, even when he wasn't already exhausted from a long day's flight. The worse part was that he didn't want to run.

Tense and reluctant, he climbed back up to the rock. He shifted to groundling, facing Stone.

"Sorry," Stone said, which wasn't what Moon was expecting. "You all right?"

He reached out to brush the dirt off Moon's forehead.

Moon shied away, startled and self-conscious. "Yes."

Stone watched him for a moment, then let his breath out. "Will you still come with me to Indigo Cloud?"

Moon hesitated. He had always thought that he was flying into a fight; not talking about it had just let him ignore it until they got there. And he was going to have to deal with the Fell sometime. "You think the Fell are already there."

"Yes, they could be there now. They know we're weak, ready to be hit. I don't know how much time we've got." Stone winced, as if it hurt to admit it. "It'll take three days at the speed we've been traveling. I can make it in one."

Moon nodded. That would give him more time to think, at least. "Show me which way to go and I'll follow—"

“Or I could take you with me. Now.”

Moon eyed him. After Stone’s rescue, he knew what being carried was like. He would have to be in his other form most of the time to stand the cold and the wind, and he had already spent more than a day that way. It was one thing to keep flying on the edge of exhaustion when you knew you could land and collapse when you couldn’t take it anymore; it was another to know he wouldn’t have any control. He said, warily, “I don’t understand why I can’t just follow you.”

“Because I need to get there in a hurry,” Stone said, every word pointed, “and I need you with me. Look, you either trust me or you don’t—”

“I don’t,” Moon said, frustrated.

“You’re such a cynical bastard. You’re going to fit right in at home.” Stone lifted his brows. “Well?”

“Why do you need me with you?”

“I don’t want you changing your mind along the way.” Stone shook his head, exasperated. “I haven’t given you a lot of reasons why coming to Indigo Cloud is a good thing for you. That’s because I’ve been gone for half a season, most of which I wasted talking while those worthless asses in Star Aster strung me along. I don’t know what I’m going to find when I get back. I don’t know what I’ll be up against. And I’m not going to make empty promises.”

Moon set his jaw to keep from growling. The sun was dying into the distance, only the bare rim still visible above the hills, and the glow on the black wound in the side of the mound was fading. “All right, I’ll go.”

For once, he could tell Stone was relieved. “Good.”

Moon looked away, uncomfortable. “But we need food and water first. The damn Fell aren’t any good to eat.” Stone lifted a brow. Moon added belatedly, “Not that I ever tried.”

Chapter Four

“We’re here.”

Moon opened bleary eyes to see Stone leaning over him. “Uh?” Stone patted his chest. “Still with me?”

“I think...” Moon was cold and sick and didn’t remember shifting to groundling. He lay on hard ground with sparse grass poking him everywhere. He winced. “Maybe.”

“I’ll get some water.” Stone retreated and Moon blinked up at a gray sky, heavy with rain clouds. Did he say we were there?

The past night and day of flying was mostly a painful blur. They had stayed at Sky Copper only long enough for Moon to hunt down one of the big grasseaters while Stone checked what was left of the colony for survivors. It was well after dark, and Moon sat at the edge of a small spring a little distance away when Stone came out again. He landed near Moon, shook the dirt off, and shifted to groundling.

“Nothing?” Moon asked, not expecting an answer. Over the scent of wet earth from the spring, Moon could still smell the stink of death radiating off Stone. He thought if there had been anybody alive in there, they would have come out by now.

“I had to dig down to the nurseries.” Stone wiped the gritty dirt off his forehead and crouched next to Moon, scooping up a double handful of water to drink. He shook the drops off his hands, looking away. “I found what was left of the Arbora clutches, but no royal Aeriats. I know they had at least one fledgling queen. They brought her out to show me the last time I was here.”

Moon felt a sick chill settle into his gut. “They took them alive.”

Stone let his breath out, weary and resigned. “I hope not.”

There wasn’t much else to say, and nothing they could do. Since the Fell would have eaten most of the dead, it was impossible to tell if any Raksura had escaped. Moon wondered if this was what had happened to the colony he had been born in, if Sorrow had been fleeing a disaster like this and had found herself with nowhere to go.

After they ate Moon's kill and drank from the spring, they were as ready as they were going to get. Stone had told him, "If it gets too much for you, let me know."

Trying to hide how little he wanted to do this, Moon had said mock-earnestly, "I'll bite a hole in your chest."

Being carried was at best uncomfortable; when he was already weary from being in his other form all day, it soon became an active torment. It helped somewhat that Moon didn't have to expend any effort. Stone held him around the waist, tucked into his chest, so Moon didn't even have to hook his claws into Stone's scales to hold on, though for a while he did it anyway. About midway through the night, he finally had to shift to groundling to sleep, but he could only stand the wind so long before having to shift back. By morning he was miserable and exhausted and half-conscious. If Stone had ever stopped to rest, Moon had been unaware of it.

"Did you say we were—" Squinting, Moon rolled over and pushed himself up on his arms. "There."

They were on a low bluff in a hilly jungle, looking out over a narrow river valley. Built across the shallow river was a huge structure, a gray stone step pyramid. It was big, bigger than the tower where they had spent the night back in the mountains. Heavy square pillars crossed the river banks, supporting the pyramid and the several levels of stone platforms at its feet. Tall trees covered the hills rising up around it, and greenery ate into the edges of the gray paving.

Some of the lower hills were terraced into gardens, with rambling rows of tall leafy plants. Unlike Sky Copper, it was occupied.

Figures moved across the platforms, standing and talking, or carrying baskets up from the gardens. Some looked like groundlings, some like Moon's other form, but smaller, and without wings. Their scales were all different colors, warm browns and metallic blues and reds and greens, and somehow he hadn't expected that at all. Then he saw one of the groundlings shift and fly up to an opening high in the face of the pyramid.

Moon couldn't stop staring. Somewhere in the back of his mind he had thought he would never see this, that when they got here the place would be as dead as Sky Copper. And seeing that pitiful ruin hadn't prepared him for this. There had to be a few hundred people in there. People like him. It was wonderful and terrifying.

And seeing it let him articulate the thought that had been plaguing him since Stone had asked him to come to a shifter settlement: If you can't fit in here, it's not them; it's you.

Stone sat on his heels and handed him the waterskin. Moon took it, still overwhelmed. “Did you build this place?” he managed to ask.

Stone eyed the complex as if he thought it unsatisfactory at best. “No. Found it, a long time ago.”

It was so different from Sky Copper’s mound. “Is it a good place to live?”

Stone shrugged. “It’s all right.” He prodded Moon in the ribs. “Drink that.”

Reminded of the waterskin, Moon lifted it and drank. He didn’t realize how thirsty he was until the lukewarm water hit his dry throat. He coughed, sputtered, and tried again, keeping it down this time. It cleared his head a little, and when he lowered the skin and wiped his mouth, he asked Stone, “What’s wrong?”

Stone rubbed his face wearily. “Fell. Somewhere inside.”

Moon stared at the building, the people moving with unhurried calm along the terraces. It didn’t seem possible. And if Stone could scent Fell up here, the Raksura down there couldn’t miss it. “Are you sure—” Stone gave him a withering look, so he said instead, “Then why does everybody look so normal?”

“I don’t know. The possibilities aren’t encouraging.” Stone took the waterskin and stuffed it back into his pack. “Come on.”

Before Moon could stand, Stone shifted, grabbed him around the waist, and they were in the air, flying toward the pyramid. Tucked into Stone’s chest, Moon missed his first entrance into Indigo Cloud. He felt Stone tilt his wings to land, and then they passed into cool shadow.

Stone released him, and Moon stumbled sideways before catching his balance. They had landed in a wide high-ceiling room, easily large enough for Stone’s other form. The slanted outer wall was open to the outside and vines had crept in, curling around the blocky, rectangular designs carved into the walls. Gray and blue paving stones lined the floor, and wide square doorways with heavy, carved lintels led further into the structure. People hurried in through those doorways, some in groundling form, some not. A few had wings folded behind their backs, but most didn’t. Arbora, Moon remembered. He and the few others with wings were Aeriats.

Moon could barely take it all in, overwhelmed by scent more than anything else. The air was laden with strange people—strange Raksura—and sweet floral scents and clean sweat. But under it all was a trace of Fell taint. Stone was right, not that Moon had doubted it.

Stone shifted to groundling, and everyone in the room instantly followed suit. It belatedly dawned on Moon that it might be a courtesy, or a gesture of respect toward Stone's age and potential threat. Moon had been doing it, most of the time, but only because it was easier to talk when they were both the same size.

Caught up in trying to absorb detail, Moon belatedly realized that everybody was staring at him. He kept his expression blank, made himself stand still when his first impulse was to dive out the doorway behind him. He had always tried to keep a low profile when he arrived at any new place; apparently that wasn't going to be an option here. And everyone was dressed better than he was, in silky garments in dark rich colors, robes or jackets and loose trousers. Moon's thin shirt and drawstring pants were torn and dirty after days of sleeping on grass or bare ground with no chance to wash, and he was suddenly intensely conscious of it.

Everybody looked different, too: short, tall, hair every shade between light and dark, skin all different tints, though that tended toward dark, warm colors, and there were no greens or blues like some groundling races. Not that Moon had been expecting their groundling forms to resemble him or Stone, but... All right, he had been expecting everyone to look like him or Stone.

One of the men stepped forward. He was short and stocky, with dark-tinted skin and red-brown hair.

"Stone," he said, sounding both wary and relieved. "We thought it would take you longer to get back." He jerked his head toward Moon. "He's from the Star Aster Court?"

Stone didn't reply immediately. His gaze swept the crowd, giving nothing away. He said, "No. None of them would agree to come. I found him along the way." He fixed his attention on the group spokesman. "There are Fell here."

An uneasy ripple traveled through the room. Most of the men dropped their gaze. One of the women said, "Pearl let them in. They were here for two days and left this morning."

Stone cocked his head. The room seemed to grow colder, as if his anger drew the warmth out of the air. "Did they happen to mention they destroyed the Sky Copper Court no more than two days ago?"

Someone gasped, and everyone went still.

Shocked, the woman said, "They asked Pearl for a treaty."

A treaty with Fell. Moon managed to choke back a derisive snort. The groundlings fell for that, too. The Fell rulers came in and

pretended to be reasonable, and the groundlings thought they could somehow appease them with land or goods or promises.

Stone absorbed that information in a silence tinged with threat. He told Moon, "You stay down here," and strode forward. The crowd hastily parted for him, and he vanished through the farther doorway.

What? Moon thought, startled. The others went after Stone, or hurried off in different directions. Moon followed, trailing behind. He had no idea how this place was laid out, where to go, how to behave. At least in groundling cities, he had some idea of how to act.

And from what he had seen outside, there were a lot of people here. It was impossible to take note of how many had wings, and maybe there was a shortage of warriors. But Moon found it increasingly hard to believe that one extra was going to make that big a difference. There was something Stone wasn't telling him. Not that he was particularly surprised by that. And there's the Fell.

He sighed and ran both hands through his hair, scratching his head. He itched all over with dirt and sweat. He needed food and a bath; he needed rest. Worry about the Fell later, he thought, and wandered into the next room, following the sound and scent of running water.

He found a wide corridor with a shallow pool running down one side, fed by water falling out of a channel in the wall and down a series of square stone blocks. The other walls were ornamented with deep carvings, bas-reliefs all showing giant groundlings in strange, square-plated armor, towering over trees and hills and other fleeing groundling tribes. The corridor led to another large room with an outer doorway, letting in a cool, rain-scented breeze. It looked out onto the jungle climbing the cliff and the river below the pyramid.

This area was more temperate than the Cordans' river valley. The trees were taller with heavier trunks, with dark gray bark and wide spreading canopies. Many of them had to be at least a hundred paces tall. They fought for space with fern-trees nearly as large, with deceptively delicate foliage, more familiar plume and spiral trees. The river was shallow and clear enough that Moon could see the bottom, lined with flat stones and gravel. Like Stone had said, it wasn't deep enough for good fishing.

Moon drifted back toward an interior doorway, following the sound of voices. He passed through a couple of blocky connecting passages into a big airy chamber that had to be at the center of the building. A shaft was open to the floors above and below, daylight falling through from some opening high above. Green plants hung

down from the upper levels, vines heavy with small yellow fruit. A few people stood across the room in an anxious group, talking. Several children ran past, boys and girls, none taller than Moon's elbow, all shifting apparently at random.

Moon stared after them, having a sudden, vivid memory of playing with his brothers and sister, of being able to make them shift just by startling them. None of these children seemed to have wings. Watching everyone shift was strange, too. He had forgotten how it looked, the blurring of vision, the illusion of dark mist in the instant of change. It wasn't as impressive as when Stone did it, but it still took some getting used to again.

"What do you think you're doing here?"

Moon turned slowly. Confronting him were two young men, both shorter than him, but heavysset and powerfully muscled. The leather vests and pants they wore were scratched and stained from hard use. Long machete-like blades with carved bone handles hung from their belts. Both men looked hostile and cocky. Since Moon wasn't going to say I don't know what I'm doing here, he said nothing, just studied them with narrowed eyes.

When Moon failed to respond, one man said to the other, "He's the feral solitary Stone brought."

"Solitary" might be accurate, but "feral" just wasn't fair. Moon said, "So?"

The second one bared his teeth. "You need to leave."

Moon let out an annoyed breath. He needed a fight right now like he needed a kick to the head. Then another man strode in through the archway behind them. He was taller than the first two, though not quite Moon's height. He had dark bronze skin, fluffy brown hair, and a belligerent jaw. With an irritated glare, he said, "Leave him alone."

Being defended by a stranger was new and diverting for Moon, but the two men didn't seem impressed. The first one made his voice deliberately bored, saying, "This isn't your concern, Chime."

Chime didn't back down. "I think it is. Who told you to do this?"

The second one shot him a sideways glance, growling, "No one told us to do anything."

"Really?" Chime's mouth set in a skeptical line. "Because you two have never had a thought in your heads that someone else didn't put there."

Both men shifted. They were both Arbora, and while one had

copper scales, the other was a dark green. Both bared fangs at Chime, crouching as if preparing to leap at him. Chime shifted in response, falling back a step. He was a dark reflective blue, with a gold sheen under his scales and wings folded against his back.

That they had all shifted seemed to indicate that the fight was on. Here we go, Moon thought wearily. He hadn't even been here long enough to find a place to sit down. He shifted, flaring his wings, spines, and tail to look bigger.

The response wasn't exactly what he had anticipated. Both the Arbora leapt backward out of reach, badly startled, shifting back to groundling almost in tandem.

The first one muttered, "Sorry," and they both backed away, turning only to slip out through the nearest doorway.

Chime shifted back to groundling, and he looked startled, too. "Oh, I didn't—"

"You handled that well," a woman said, sounding amused. She stood barely three paces away, watching them, and somehow Moon hadn't noticed her before. Her groundling form was small, with unkempt, ragged white-blonde hair, and very pale, nearly colorless skin. Her face was thin, making her look older than she should, and her dress was a loose red smock with a torn hem. "Shell and Grain have been effectively embarrassed, but they know it's their own fault."

Moon shifted back to groundling too, since he was the only one who hadn't. He shrugged one shoulder, uncomfortable with the woman's scrutiny.

"Can you talk?" Chime demanded.

The woman lifted her brows at him in reproof. "Chime."

Chime waved a hand in exasperation. "Well, he hasn't said anything!"

Moon folded his arms, even more uncomfortable. He knew he probably looked surly, but there wasn't much he could do about that. "I can talk."

"Ah." Smiling, the woman inclined her head to him. "I'm Flower, and this is Chime."

"I'm Moon," he admitted warily.

Flower asked, "Will you come with us?"

Moon's first impulse was to say yes. Then it occurred to him that going off with Stone just because he asked him to had gotten Moon far

across the Three Worlds in the middle of a situation where he had no idea of the dangers or what anyone's motive was. "Where?"

"Just down to the bowers." After a moment, she clarified, "The living quarters."

It wasn't as if Moon had anywhere else to go just now, but he still hesitated. "Do you have food?"

Chime looked puzzled and a little suspicious. "Why wouldn't we have food?"

Flower nodded seriously. "Yes. It's nearly time for the second day-meal, and we have plenty to share."

That did it. "Then I'll go with you," Moon said.

Flower led the way to the next chamber, to a narrow stairwell. It had more of the blocky carvings standing out from the walls and, as they descended, Moon noticed the steps were a little too tall for his comfort. They weren't nearly tall enough for the giant stature of the groundlings in the wall carvings; either the artists had been exaggerating for flattery or for some ritual purpose, or they had had a wildly disproportionate view of themselves.

"There are other ways down," Flower explained, glancing back at Moon, "but this is the quickest and we don't have to shift. Well, the quickest for me. I don't have wings."

"We're both mentors," Chime added firmly, as if Moon might argue.

Moon was glad most of their attention was focused on not stumbling on the awkward stairs; it gave him a chance to adjust to the fact that he was with two shamen without betraying any dismay. Except... hadn't Stone said that mentors were a caste of the Arbora? He slid a look at Chime. "You've got wings."

"I know that," Chime said, pointedly.

All right, fine, Moon thought, and dropped the subject.

Several levels down, low enough to hear the rush of the river somewhere below them, they turned into a maze of small rooms with ceilings streaked with old soot. Niches were carved out of the walls, probably meant for lamps but now stuffed with glowing moss, like the light-baskets Moon had seen in Sky Copper. So far, that seemed the only similarity; this place felt cramped and closed-in compared to what he had seen of the ruined mound. Remembering Stone's answer on this subject hadn't been very informative either, he asked, "Why did you pick this place to live?"

“We didn’t,” Chime said, sounding resigned. “The court has been here at least seven generations.”

“Many of us think we should go back to the west, where we came from in the first place,” Flower said as she stopped at a doorway. She looked up at Moon, her face thoughtful and a little worried. “It’s why Stone went to the Star Aster Court for help. Didn’t he tell you?”

Moon hesitated, then found himself answering honestly. “Sort of.”

“Hmm,” Flower said to herself, and stepped into the room. “This is the teachers’ court. The mentors use it too, but there aren’t nearly as many of us.” The lintel was low and both Chime and Moon had to duck under it. Inside, the ceiling was just high enough to stand comfortably, but this room didn’t feel cramped; one wall looked out into an open atrium lined with pillared porticos, and heavily planted with fruit vines and white and yellow flowers. Three low doorways led off into other rooms, and cushions and woven straw mats were scattered on the floor. Moon smelled baking bread, and his stomach cramped in pure lust.

A young man ducked out another doorway, startled to see them, or maybe just startled by Moon’s strange presence. He had dark hair and bronze skin, and a stocky, strong build. Flower told him, “Bell, this is Moon. He’s been traveling with Stone for days, and he’s starving.”

Moon knew he should have been trying to get more details about the situation, like why the Fell had been allowed in, and what was likely to come of it. And he needed to find a casual way to ask the direction of the nearest groundling territory in case he had to leave here in a hurry. But Moon was thoroughly distracted by the food and the number of people who kept coming in to be introduced by Flower. Bell, with helpers Rill, Petal, and Weave, brought big wooden plates with cuts of raw red meat, pieces of yellow and green fruit, crispy bread, and lumpy white things that turned out to be root vegetables baked in sweet spices. It was a surprise, and a relief, that except for not cooking the meat, they ate like groundlings, and didn’t just hunt for big kills. Moon had started to miss bread, cooked roots, and fruit.

By the time he made it through the first helpings of everything, he had an audience of more than twenty people. They were all in groundling form, and all seemed to be half a head or so shorter than he and Chime.

When most of the people in the room were finished eating, Bell and his helpers brought out brown glazed clay pots and cups, and Flower poured tea for Moon. Watching him, her face serious, she

asked, “Were you with Stone when he stopped at Sky Copper?”

Everyone went quiet, hanging on his answer, and Moon tried not to twitch uncomfortably. “Yes.”

“Is it true?” Petal asked worriedly. She had dark hair and warm brown skin, and a serious set to her expression. “The Fell killed them?”

Moon knew the kind of lies and distortions the Fell were capable of, and that if there were any possible way to make Stone out a liar, they would try it. He said, “Some dakti and a kethel were still there. If Stone had known he needed to prove it, he could have brought their heads back.” Not that Moon would have enjoyed traveling with even dead dakti.

Chime looked at Flower, his jaw set stubbornly. “Pearl can’t ignore this. She’ll have to admit that the Fell are too dangerous to ally with.”

“She doesn’t have to admit anything. That’s the problem,” Flower said with irony. She glanced at Moon, who thought he was keeping his expression noncommittal. She smiled in apology and explained, “Pearl is our reigning queen. She allowed the Fell to enter the colony to ‘negotiate.’”

“How many Fell?” Moon asked cautiously.

Bell settled on a mat next to Flower, saying ruefully, “It was only one ruler and two minor dakti. We didn’t really get a close look at them.”

Moon nodded, folding another square of bread around several syrupy root slices. “It always starts with one.”

Chime, who picked at the fruit with a depressed expression, looked up, frowning. “What do you mean?”

Moon managed to swallow a large bite without choking himself. “When they take groundling cities.”

Everyone absorbed that in worried silence. Petal wrapped her arms around her knees as if she were cold. “I wonder if Pearl realizes that.”

“She does.” Flower’s mouth was a grim line, as if the yellow fruit she was slicing presented some desperate problem. “Our histories have chronicled the Fell’s advances in the larger groundling capitals around the Crescent Sea, and in the Star Isles. Some of the mentors of the last generation made a study of it.”

Bell asked Moon, “You lived with groundlings?”

Moon just answered with a combination shrug and nod. He realized he was still having trouble getting his mind around the fact that these people knew what he was.

Flower wasn't deterred by his failure to answer. She passed the new plate of fruit to the newcomers in the back and asked Moon, "What court did you come from? I know you were living alone, but where were you born?"

Moon hesitated over that. He could lie, but if he did, this was going to turn into that conversation, the one where he was asked ordinary, innocuous questions he had no way to answer. Pretending to be a groundling had trapped him into it time after time. And it would be for nothing, if anybody bothered to ask Stone. "I don't know."

Flower lifted her brows at that, started to speak, then hesitated. Puzzled, Chime asked, "Were you living near the Star Aster Court?"

"I don't think so. I'm not sure where it is." Moon decided to get it over with and admitted, "I hadn't seen another Raksura in a long time."

Petal frowned doubtfully. "How long?"

Moon shrugged. "About thirty-five turns. I think."

Flower watched him with a particular concentration. Bell and Chime stared at Moon, then at each other. Petal shook her head slightly, almost in disbelief, and said, "But you must have been a fledgling, then."

Moon shrugged again, trying to think of a way to change the subject. Saying, Hey, do you think a Fell flight will show up in the next few days? might do it.

"But why?" Chime asked. He made a vague gesture, taking in the room, the group of teachers and mentors. "Why avoid other Raksura?"

Moon couldn't help betraying a little exasperation. After all, he had looked for these people for at least fifteen damn turns before giving up. "I wasn't avoiding anybody. I didn't know where I came from, what my people were called. My—The others died before they could tell me."

"Who were—" Chime began, and Flower held up a hand for him to be silent. She said slowly, "I have a terrible feeling..." She wiped the fruit syrup off her hands, watching Moon. "Did Stone tell you why he wanted you to come here, to the Indigo Cloud Court?"

Moon was getting a terrible feeling too. By habit he had taken a seat near the open wall into the atrium, and no one was behind him.

“He said you needed warriors to help defend the colony.”

“That’s partly true.” Chime looked dubious. “He was going to try to get the Star Aster Court to send at least a couple of clutches of warriors, but—”

Flower said deliberately, “Stone went to look for a consort. He didn’t say he had succeeded, and the two soldiers who challenged you earlier obviously didn’t realize what you were. You aren’t wearing the token that Jade sent with Stone, and it’s not easy to tell a young consort from a warrior in groundling form.”

Everybody was looking at him expectantly. Confused and wary, Moon asked, “What’s a consort?”

Now everybody was looking at him as if he had said something crazy. Petal put a hand over her mouth. Chime’s jaw dropped.

Flower bit her lip. “Yes, that’s what I was afraid of.” Hesitating, as if choosing her words carefully, she said, “A consort is a male warrior. A fertile male warrior, who can breed with a queen.”

What? Moon shook his head. “But I’m not—”

Flower nodded. “You are.”

Moon kept shaking his head. “No. How could you possibly—”

Anxiously, Chime put in, “Your scales are black. Only consorts are that color. You didn’t know? You really didn’t know that?”

I really didn’t know, Moon thought blankly. I really didn’t know a lot of things. “But Stone is—” that color. Stone who had said he had children, grandchildren.

Flower leaned forward, carefully explaining, “Stone is a consort. Or was, turns ago. Pearl, the reigning queen, is one of his line. Jade is her daughter, the only surviving queen from her last royal clutch.”

“He didn’t tell me that,” Moon managed to say. He pushed to his feet, turned, and took a couple of long strides outside to the atrium, where the grass and plants were green under the wan cloudy daylight. He shifted and jumped straight up the wall.

He caught the ledge above and climbed. Using the clinging vines and the cracks and chinks in the old stone to get up out of the atrium, he made it to the broad ledge of the next level.

He needed more of a drop to clear the side of the pyramid, so he followed the ledge around to where it hung out over the river. A woman sat there, glumly surveying the water and the hilly gardens. Her scales were a soft but vivid blue, with a silver-gray pattern

overlaying them like a web. Her wings were folded, and the frills and spines behind her head formed an elaborate mane, reaching all the way down her back to her tail. They flared out as she sat up, startled.

“Sorry,” Moon muttered, and dove off the ledge.

The sky threatened rain, though the air was warm and close. Moon flew upriver a short distance, far enough to get past the terraced gardens, but still in sight of the pyramid. The river was wider here, with pools all along the banks. A small stream trickled down from the hill, turning into a waterfall where it tumbled over the rocky bank and into a pool. Its edges were overhung by trees with broad leaves longer than Moon was tall, forming drooping curtains. He landed on a flat rock that jutted up from the shallow water, and shifted back to groundling to conserve his strength.

He sat down and put his feet in the cool clear pool. This was his fault. He should have pushed Stone for more information, asked more questions, but it was another engrained habit from turns of hiding what he was. In most groundling societies he had lived in, if you asked questions, it was an invitation for others to ask questions back, necessitating more complicated lies. It was less dangerous just to listen and try to glean information that way. Idiot, he told himself again.

Tiny little fish, blue-gray to blend in with the river bottom, came to investigate his feet. They scattered as Moon climbed down the rock and waded to the waterfall. He stood under the spray, hoping it would clear his head. It didn't, but at least it washed several days worth of dust and grime out of his skin and hair and ragged clothes.

He stepped out of the fall, shaking water out of his hair, and sensed movement above him. He squinted up to see a winged form against the gray sky. The scales were dark blue, the vivid color dimmed by the rain clouds.

It didn't surprise him that they had sent someone after him. That was part of the reason he had come out here, to see who they would send, and if they would come to talk or to try to drag him back. Moon wrung the water out of his shirt and watched as whoever it was spiraled down. As the figure drew closer, he realized it was an indigo blue warrior carrying someone still in groundling form: Chime and Flower. They landed on the flat rocks above the bank, and Chime set Flower on her feet as he shifted to groundling.

“There's no reason to be upset,” Flower said immediately. She waved her hands in helpless frustration. “It's an honor, and a responsibility too, of course. Like being born a queen, or a mentor.”

Chime added rapidly, “Stone is the only other consort in the court

now. The ones in Pearl's clutches didn't live, and her sister queen Amber died, and Rain, who was Pearl's consort, and the younger consorts, Dust and Burn and all the others—all died in fighting with the Sardis, or the Gathen, or went to other courts, and then there was a bad outbreak of lung disease, we're susceptible to that, you know, or maybe you didn't know, and—"

"I'm ..." Moon made a broad gesture, taking in the whole valley. "Not ready for this."

"For what?" Flower looked a little desperate.

"I don't know." If he couldn't explain it to himself, he couldn't explain it to them. He had come here thinking he would do what he always did: try to fit in. Not that it had worked out so far, but he had never found a better alternative.

Flower spread her hands. "Just come back and rest, and talk to Stone. You've come all this way, and you have nothing to lose."

Moon wearily scrubbed his hands through his hair. Of course, she was right about that. But it still felt like he was giving something up when he said, "I'll come back."

Chapter Five

Moon reluctantly followed Flower and Chime back to the colony, alighting in the teachers' court again. The food and the cold water had helped, but Moon's exhaustion had settled in his back as long lines of sore muscle, and he knew he had reached the limit of his endurance. When he shifted back to groundling, he almost stumbled into a shallow pool of water half-concealed by trailing vines. He said, "Where's Stone?"

"He's still with Pearl," Chime said, watching him anxiously. "You know, the reigning queen."

Flower took Chime's arm and gave him a gentle push toward the door into the common room. "Go and tell the others not to worry." She turned back to Moon. "Stone is the only one who has any chance of convincing Pearl not to treat with the Fell." Her hair was tangled from the flight and she smoothed it back. In the daylight her skin was milky pale, almost translucent; it made her seem absurdly delicate. The shadows under her eyes looked like bruises. "We've all tried, and he's our last hope."

Moon had to admit that was more important than his problems. If the Fell came at this place the way they had attacked Sky Copper, hope wouldn't be an issue. He looked around the court; maybe the rain would hold off and he could at least get some sleep. "I'll wait here."

Flower gave him a rueful look. "Come inside to the bowers. There's plenty of room and you can get some rest. And we'll find you some new clothes."

Moon shook his head. He didn't want to accept gifts from these people. "No, I don't need—"

"Moon," Flower said, with a trace of exasperation, "Yours are about to fall off. And you're a guest here; we owe you that much, at least."

When she put it that way, it was hard to argue. And the lure of a comfortable place to sleep was impossible to resist.

The first part of the living quarters Moon saw was the baths. Petal and Bell led him down the stairs from the common room to a series of

vaulted, half-lit chambers, where pools were filled by the water wheels that fed the fountains throughout the pyramid. Some were as cold as the river while others were warmed by hot stones, fueled by the same magic that made the glowing moss.

Once Petal and Bell left, the place was almost empty. Only one chamber at the far end of the space was currently occupied. It held two young men and a woman, presumably teachers, who all struggled to bathe five small children. With all the splashing and shrieking, no one paid attention to Moon. Hot water and oil soap were a luxury he hadn't experienced in more than a turn.

He spent the time just lying in a hot pool, soaking the aches out of his skin. His clothes were mostly dry by the time Petal returned, but she brought him a robe of heavy, silky material, dark blue lined with black.

He followed her up another level to a long open hall. It had many tall doorways, some opening to narrow stairways, some to rooms curtained off with long drapes of fabric. A shallow pool of water stretched down the center, and air shafts wreathed with vines pierced the outer wall.

"It's all teachers in these bowers," Petal said, pointing him to one of the doorways. It had a little set of stairs leading up to a small room. "There's an extra bed up there. No one will bother you." He hesitated. Smiling, she gave him a little push. "Go on. You need to rest."

Moon went up the stairs to the little room at the top. He had thought it would be too closed-in for comfort, but it was only partially walled off, with a large gap between the tops of the blocky walls and the ceiling. It took him a moment to realize the big straw basket thing suspended in the middle of it was the bed.

It was curved, made of woven reeds, and hung from a heavy wooden beam placed across the walls. Wide enough for at least four people, it was stuffed with a random collection of blankets and cushions. A few more tightly-woven storage baskets were stacked around. Moon lifted the lids and saw they held soft folded cloth, packed with sweet herbs. He wondered if they traded it to anybody. There were plenty of places where bolts of good strong cloth would be highly-prized items.

By that point, he could hear that Petal had left the room below, and he went back down to do a little exploring. A few other people remained, all of them occupied with chores; no one paid much attention to him. He prowled around the long central hall to find other ways in and out, exploring the air shafts, making certain he

could get out in a hurry if he had to. He went up a stairway, finding three levels of similar halls above this one, all of which seemed to be occupied by Arbora. It was all open, nearly indefensible. When the Fell came, the stone walls might keep out the major kethel, but the minor dakti would come through here in swarms, killing everything in their path.

When Moon returned to his room or bower or whatever it was called, he faced the swaying basket bed, regarding it with weary doubt. He had slept on the ground, on rocks, and occasionally hanging upside down by his tail from a tree branch, so he supposed he could manage this. At least the basket was more than long enough for him; he had spent time in the enclaves of short-statured groundling races where all the beds were a pace or two shorter than he was.

He shifted to use his claws to climb the wall, belly-flopped into the basket, and shifted back. It took his weight, only swaying a little, and he sprawled in relief.

Whether it was the soft cushions or the fact that the basket was suspended in the air through no effort of his own, it was the most comfortable bed he had ever been in.

He slept soundly, only cracking an eyelid suspiciously when he heard quiet footsteps on the stairs. But it was only Petal, who left a bundle of clothing on the top step and retreated.

He woke sometime later, aware that somewhere past the heavy stone walls, the sun had set. His stomach was empty again, and he realized he had no idea if they had an evening meal here. Add one more to the long list of things he still don't know.

With a groan, he climbed out of the bed and dropped to the floor. He picked up the bundle of clothes Petal had left, still debating whether or not to accept them. The fabric was dyed dark, the weaving of the shirt so fine it caught on the callous on his fingers. The pants were of a tougher and probably more durable material. A draft came up the open stair raising a chill on his groundling skin and reminding him it would be cooler here, especially at night; he decided not to be stupid.

He pulled on the shirt and pants, leaving the robe Petal had loaned him on the basket next to the bundle of his old clothes. He started to go down the steps, but hesitated in the doorway.

The scent in the air was different than it had been earlier. He couldn't hear any casual movement, but instinct told him someone waited silently nearby, maybe more than one someone. The others who lived in this hall would be talking or sleeping or doing some task,

not just watching. Stalking, Moon thought, putting a name to that change in the air. It might be the two soldiers again, back for another try at him. If he was going to be attacked, he might as well get it over with.

He went down the steps and into the apparently empty hall. To draw them out, he stopped at the pool and sat on his heels to scoop up a handful of water and drink.

Two male warriors dropped out of the shadows in the high ceiling and landed lightly on the floor not ten paces away. Moon didn't twitch, didn't glance up at them.

One said, "Solitary." His voice had the extra resonance of his shifted form, rough and threatening.

Moon slid a look at him, slow and deliberate. "That's not my name." The first warrior was a vivid green, with a blue tone under his scales. The other was copper with a gold tone. Both were big, at least as tall and as broad as Moon's shifted form.

The green one tilted his head with predatory intent. "I'm River and that's Drift. We don't care what your name is."

Moon shook the water off his hand and pushed to his feet, making the movement casual and easy, as if they were no more threatening than a couple of noisy groundling kids. "How long were you waiting to tell me that?" He didn't shift; they wanted a fight, and he wanted to make them work for it.

River didn't make the mistake of trying to answer the question. He gave an amused growl. "You thought no one would notice you hiding down here with the Arbora?"

"No. I thought even you two could find me." There was a certain freedom in not having to be unobtrusive; Moon could be as big an ass as he wanted to these two.

Drift, the copper warrior, bared his fangs in a derisive grin. "Oh, we found you. And this court doesn't need a consort so badly that we have to take in a crazy solitary."

Moon folded his arms, another sign he didn't consider them a threat. "I heard you did, since Star Aster wouldn't bother to piss on you."

That one hit the target. Drift hissed, and River snarled, "If you want to leave here alive, then you leave tonight."

Moon moved forward, shifting in mid-step and closing the distance between them in a sudden blur of motion. The next instant he

was barely a hand span away, wings half-extended and spines flared. "Make me leave."

Drift jerked back, but River didn't flinch. His spines flared, but voices from the far end of the hall interrupted. A group of men and women were coming in through the passage, some of them in Arbora form. One of them said, loud enough to carry, "What are River and Drift doing here? I thought they were too good for us."

In a hushed tone, someone else said, "And who's that?"

Drift fell back another step. "River. Not in front of them."

Moon didn't move. River hissed again, low and furious, then he leapt up the nearest partition. Drift was barely a pace behind him, and they both vanished into the darkness of the ceiling near the air shafts. The Arbora watched them go, with a babble of hushed comment.

Feeling suddenly far too conspicuous, Moon shifted back to groundling and turned away. He didn't really have anywhere else to go, so he went to the doorway on this end of the hall, descending the steps toward the teachers' court.

He was at the bend of the stairs when he heard Stone's voice. On impulse, he stopped just out of sight of the room below. He couldn't see anything except glowing moss crammed into a niche on the opposite wall, but he could hear a dozen or so people, breathing, stirring uneasily.

He heard Stone say, "I'm telling you, I want to leave here."

Sounding startled, someone said, "But you just got back."

There was grim exasperation in Stone's voice. "I meant the colony. Is there any one of you who won't admit that there's something wrong here? That there has been for the past forty turns? We've had dead clutches, fewer births —"

"But that just happens—" another voice protested.

"That doesn't just happen," Stone snapped. "You're all too young to remember how it should be. We're a strong court with good bloodlines. We should have as many Aeriats as we have Arbora, and enough consorts that each sister queen could take three or four and go off to build her own court. That's what they're doing at Star Aster. Why do you think none of them would come with me?"

Someone said, "If their mentors told them this place was ill-omened, they were—"

"Pearl's thinking of treating with the Fell," Chime pointed out, his voice dry. "I'd call that ill-omened."

Flower spoke, and she just sounded tired. “Stone, I’ve looked and looked. All the mentors have looked, alone and in concert. We can’t find anything wrong, no matter what we try.”

There was a pause, and Stone prompted, “And?”

“And I think it means that whatever it is... is hidden very carefully,” she admitted.

There was an uneasy murmur from the others. Petal said, “There’s nothing wrong with your augury; we know that.”

A new voice, male, low and rough, said, “Speaking for the soldiers, I’m not against leaving. Whether it’s some kind of bad omen working here or not, this place hasn’t been good for us for a long time. But what is Pearl going to say?”

“The fact that we’re having this talk without her says a lot, doesn’t it?” Chime said uneasily.

Stone didn’t seem disturbed by the objection. “I’ll handle Pearl.”

Flower sighed. “I know you want her to give way to Jade. I do, too. But Jade has to take that responsibility for herself. You can’t do it for her.”

There was another uncomfortable pause. The man who had said he spoke for the soldiers broke it with, “I think we all agree that if Jade takes the court, it would be a good thing. But not with a consort we don’t know.”

There was an edge to Stone’s voice. “What exactly did you think I was going to Star Aster for, Knell?”

Knell replied, “He’s not from Star Aster. He’s a wild solitary you picked up along the way.”

Petal’s voice was pointed. “If he was wild, he wouldn’t have been living with groundlings; he would have been eating them—”

“How do we know he wasn’t?” Knell said. “Besides, living with groundlings isn’t exactly a point in his favor either—”

Flower cut him off sharply. “Knell, the mentors and teachers in this room have spoken to him. You haven’t. You may want to reserve your opinion until you have something to base it on.”

There was another glum pause. Then Chime said, “And how do you know Pearl isn’t going to want him herself? I mean, he’s beautiful, and if she takes a new consort—”

Stone interrupted, “She’s three times his age, and she’s not so lost to sense that she’d try to take a young consort against his will.”

Flower cleared her throat suddenly. "And he's here."

She must have caught Moon's scent. He didn't hesitate, pushing away from the wall and taking the last few steps down into the room. The space was more crowded than he had realized, with people seated all around on the floor, standing in the other doorways. All of them stared, flustered by his sudden appearance; for most of them, this would be their first look at the feral solitary. Moon ignored it all to face Stone. "Something you forgot to tell me?"

His voice came out more choked than he had intended, and his jaw was so tight it almost hurt to talk. It was ridiculous to feel this way; Stone didn't owe him anything. Moon had been the one in debt, and helping Stone against the Fell in Sky Copper had made them even.

Stone watched him a long moment. His blue eyes, clear and clouded, were as unreadable as ever. He said, "We need to talk in private."

There was a confused stir as some of their audience took that as a dismissal, but Stone turned and walked outside to the atrium. Moon went after him, stepping out of the light of the glow-moss into the dark garden space and the heavy scent of wet earth and recent rain. His shoulders twitched in relief; it was enough for the moment just to be out of reach of all those unfriendly and curious eyes.

Stone didn't speak; he just shifted and jumped straight up and climbed the side of the building, a great dark shape, big wings half-furled and tail lashing.

Moon waited until Stone leapt off the building into the air. He shifted and followed, climbing up until he could drop off a ledge and catch the breeze with his wings. The crescent moon was mostly shrouded by clouds, but he could see Stone had already crossed the dark stretch of the river and the terraced fields. Stone landed on one of the higher hills, treeless and unoccupied by anything except a few flat rocks arranged in a rough circle. Moon banked around and landed a careful distance away, well out of the reach of a sudden lunge.

Stone shifted back to groundling, then sat down on one of the rocks, facing toward the dark shape of the colony. He moved slowly, like his body ached, like old groundlings with bad joints moved.

Moon hesitated then shifted, too. The wind was cool enough to make him glad he had accepted the new clothes. He could scent other Raksura in the air, probably sentries, but none were close. Stone didn't move, and after a moment Moon walked up through the wet grass to stand near him.

The pyramid was studded with light from doorways, openings, and air shafts, shining down to reflect off the dark surface of the river. In the night the whole structure looked vulnerable—too open, indefensible.

Up here, the only sound was the wind moving through leaves. Into the quiet, Stone said, “I meant to tell you at Sky Copper, but I changed my mind. If you knew, you might not have come here with me. And I needed you to come here with me.”

Moon felt a little of the tension go out of his back. At least Stone wasn’t trying to pretend it had been some kind of mistake and not a deliberate omission. Moon folded his arms, looking down the dark river. His own thoughts weren’t so easy to sort out.

Becoming one of the warriors who defended the colony from Fell and other threats was one thing, but this... was something else. And he hadn’t forgotten that a queen’s power wasn’t just theoretical; a queen could keep him from shifting, keep him grounded, as long as he was close to her. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say, and was a little surprised when it was, “The last woman I was with poisoned me so her people could drag me off to be killed by giant vargits.”

It was hard to tell in the dark, but Stone seemed to take that in thoughtfully.

He shrugged. “Most groundlings think consorts look like Fell.”

Moon’s grimace was bitter. “I’d been with her for months. She said she wanted a baby. My baby.”

“Oh.” Stone apparently felt he couldn’t argue with that. “Are you going to leave?”

Moon took a sharp breath, swallowing back the first impulsive reply. He paced away, looking down on the terraced fields, the plants moving gently in the breeze, the moonlight catching a glint of water between the rows. It would help if he knew what he wanted. “What, are you saying you wouldn’t keep me here?”

Stone snorted. His voice dry, he said, “We both know you can get away from me if you put your mind to it.” He sat up straight and stretched extravagantly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Even if I was that stupid, the Arbora wouldn’t stand for it, especially the mentors. Besides, the court doesn’t need a prisoner, it needs consorts.”

From what Moon had seen, the court apparently differed in that opinion and didn’t feel it needed either. Moon said, “I’ve already been told to leave.”

“By a warrior called River?”

Moon rolled his shoulders and didn't answer, staring stubbornly at the dark fields. Stone's occasional ability to read minds was only one of his annoying qualities.

"That was a guess," Stone said. "I told you about royal clutches. Sometimes they're all male, and the fledglings who don't develop into consorts become ordinary warriors. Amber was Pearl's sister queen, and River came from one of her royal clutches." He added, with a trace of acid, "I don't solicit River's opinion, no matter how much he thinks I ought to."

That might be true, but it didn't change anything. River wasn't the only one who wanted Moon gone.

Moon realized he could hear sound rising from across the river, a chorus of notes, high and low, blending in harmony and mingled with the wind and the gentle rush of the river. He went still, staring toward the colony, the breath catching in his throat. He couldn't make out words, but the sound seemed to gather in his body, resonating off his bones, as if it were playing him like an instrument.

Stone lifted his head, listening. "They're singing, Arbora to Aeriad, and back again." A single voice, high and pure, lifted to weave through the others, then died away. Moon felt sweat break out all over his body, prickling on his skin in the cool air. Apparently unaffected, Stone said, "That was Jade. Pearl never sings anymore."

Moon turned half away, suppressing the urge to shiver and twitch. The singing felt... alien, and he resented the way it seemed to pull at him. It could pull all it wanted; whatever that was, he wasn't a part of it.

He wondered just how close the Cordans' camp had been to the Star Aster Court, how close he had been to finding other Raksura. Or how close they had been to finding him. Not that that would have left him any better off than he was now. It sounded as though Star Aster had no need for extra consorts; having seen the prevailing opinion of feral solitaires here, he knew they would have driven him off. He spoke the thought that had become increasingly obvious all day long, with every interaction he had had. "I don't belong here." Maybe if he had been younger, there would have been a chance, but not now.

Stone made a derisive noise. "You're afraid you don't belong here. There's a difference."

Moon seethed inwardly but held his temper, knowing it would give Stone a victory if he lost it. "I've been walking into new places all my life. I know when I don't belong."

Stone sounded wry. “You’ve been here half a day, and for most of that you were asleep.”

Moon said sourly, “I like to make quick decisions.”

Stone pushed to his feet with a groan, looking across at the pyramid. If Flower was right, Stone had been with Pearl all afternoon trying to convince her of things she apparently didn’t want to hear. “All I’m going to ask is that you stay until I convince Pearl to give way. I want the court to leave this colony and go back to the west, to the home forest. They won’t even consider it unless we have a consort—at least a prospective consort—for Jade. Once we have a secure colony, we’ll be in a better position to get a consort to come over from another court.” He added, his voice grim, “It won’t take long. Things will come to a head soon.”

Moon wished he could find an objection to it, but it just didn’t seem that much to ask. Staying here for a short time, even if he was threatened, stared at, and talked about, wouldn’t hurt him. Not much. But there was the other problem. “What about the Fell?”

“The place of the Raksura in the Three Worlds is to kill Fell.”

Moon looked at Stone, not certain he was serious.

Stone shrugged, as if he wasn’t saying anything particularly odd. “They’re predators, just like Tath, Ghobin, a hundred others. We should be hunting them, not the other way around.” He shook his head. “After Pearl’s reign, we don’t have a lot of allies except for Sky Copper. I’d been talking to their reigning queen about combining with us.”

Moon thought Stone wasn’t the only one in the Indigo Cloud Court who had been talking. “Then someone warned the Fell you wanted to join with Sky Copper. Someone here.”

“I thought of that, too.” Stone’s voice held an edge now. “You staying?”

Moon looked at the colony; all those people, so vulnerable in the dark. “I’ll stay, and I’ll let you use me for this. But I won’t promise anything afterward.”

“We’ll see,” Stone said, amused rather than grateful. “Maybe you’ll make another quick decision.”

Moon hissed at him, shifted, and leapt into the air.

Flying back across the river to the colony, he avoided the

teachers' court and the other lighted areas. The voices still rose and fell, but the effect wasn't as loud or as penetrating, as if many of the singers had lapsed into silence.

Moon landed on a ledge and went to one of the air shafts he had found earlier, climbing down, taking the back way into the living quarters. He hoped that if anyone detected his presence, they would take the hint and leave him alone. The hall was empty, and he went back to the bower Petal had shown him. He had a warm place to sleep, at least, and he should take advantage of it while he could.

But as he climbed the steps to the little room, he paused. Someone else had been up here, and it hadn't been Petal or Bell, or even River or Drift; the unfamiliar scent still hung in the air.

Moon had left his old clothes on a basket next to the robe Petal had loaned him. There was now something on top of them, a roll of blue fabric. He poked it warily, and when nothing leapt out at him, unwrapped it. Inside was a belt, of dark butter-soft leather, tooled with red in a serpentine pattern, the round buckles of red gold. Attached to it was a sheathed knife. He drew it, finding the hilt was carved horn, and the blade was something's tooth, sharp as glass with a tensile strength like fine metal.

He thought of the bracelet he had found in Stone's pack, made of the same rich red gold as these buckles, and how Flower had said something about a token Jade had sent, to be given to the consort Stone might bring back from the Star Aster court. And he recalled Stone's comment: I'm bringing a present back for my great-great-granddaughter. Moon let his breath out in a bitter hiss. Very funny.

Moon sheathed the knife and re-wrapped it and the belt, and left the bundle halfway down the steps of the bower. Hopefully that made it clear that he wasn't accepting the gift, bribe, wage for selling himself into servitude, or whatever it was. Hopefully Stone would tell Jade or whoever had left it that Moon had said he would cooperate, that this wasn't necessary.

He climbed into the bed, listening to the court's song as it gradually diminished and finally faded away.

When Moon woke the next morning, he lay still for a while, watching dust drift in a ray of light from an air shaft. He wasn't looking forward to the day, mostly because he had no place here and no idea what to do.

He had slept badly; even if he hadn't been half-expecting River to return for another try at him, the noise had kept him awake. The openings between the thick walls and the ceiling allowed sound to

travel from the other bowers, making him even more hyper-aware of quiet voices, deep breathing, and the soft sounds of sex. It hadn't been any different at the Cordans' camp, and he knew his nerves were only on edge because these were strangers, some of them actively hostile.

The noise hadn't seemed to bother anyone else. Though if there had been two or three friendly bodies in this bed like there obviously were in some of the other bowers, Moon wouldn't have noticed it either.

He decided to do what he would usually do anywhere else and go hunting. It would give him some space to think and also make it clear he wasn't depending on the court's generosity for food.

When he climbed out of the bed, he saw the wrapped knife and belt still lay where he had left them, undisturbed. But on the step below it was another bundle, a bigger one. Unrolling it, he saw it was a fur blanket, the long soft hair dyed a shade of purple close to the haze of twilight.

With an annoyed grimace, Moon rolled it back up and left it on the step. If this went on, he was going to have to climb over a pile just to get out the door.

He went through the hall and down to the common room. As he stepped out of the stairwell, there was a sudden flurry of movement and a flash of blue and silver-gray disappeared through the outer door. The people left in the room, including Chime, Bell, and a few he didn't know, all tried to pretend that nothing had happened, with varying degrees of flustered confusion.

Moon had the feeling he knew who that blue and gray figure was: the woman he had seen on the ledge of the pyramid yesterday with a slim build and a mane shape and scale color different from anyone else. If that was Jade, then the best thing he could do was follow her example and make himself scarce. At least the atrium was bright with sunlight, promising a good flying day. He cleared his throat and said, "I'm going hunting. Is there any place I should stay away from?"

They stared blankly at him. Puzzled, Bell asked, "What do you mean?"

"Territories? Preserves? Places that are reserved for other people, or where you're letting the game increase?" He wished they would stop looking at him like that. This was a perfectly rational question.

One of the women he hadn't met yet said, "Aeriat don't... don't usually hunt, not when they're in the colony." She must be a warrior herself. She had a slim but strong build, with dark skin and curly

honey-colored hair tied back from a sharp-featured face. "That's what the hunters do."

Moon set his jaw, trying to control his annoyance. Yes, even I figured that one out. "Where I come from, if Aeriats don't hunt, they don't eat."

Chime stood hastily. "I'll go with you."

Flustered, the woman followed him a moment later. There was something just a little awkward about her that made Moon think she was young, maybe not that far from girlhood. She said, "I'm Balm. I'll go, too."

Moon kept his expression noncommittal. He had meant to go alone for a chance to explore the area and to think, but if he was going to be saddled with guards, he wasn't going to let his irritation show. He just turned and walked out to the atrium, leaving them to follow or not. The sky was a clear blue vault, no clouds in sight.

They did follow, Balm saying, "The hunters have the forest portioned off so they don't over-hunt any one area, as you said. But they don't go much more than four or five ells from the valley."

Ells? Moon thought. They must have a system of measures that he had no idea how to translate. That was all he needed. I'm getting tired of feeling like an idiot. A feral idiot.

Fortunately, Balm continued, "So if we fly toward the east, past those hills, we'll be well out of their range."

Moon shielded his eyes to look in that direction and nodded. "Good, let's go."

Balm's directions weren't wrong. Past the edge of the jungle, the hills gave way to a grassy plain with a deep clear lake in the center. Moon spotted at least five different breeds of grasseater on the first sweep, from small red lopers with high racks of horns to big shaggy beasts with blunt heads and hooves like tree trunks. But that wasn't the valley's most striking feature.

A series of large statues made of some grayish-blue stone half-circled the plain, pitted and worn by the weather. Each had to be at least eighty paces tall and twice that wide. Moon circled one but couldn't tell just what kind of creature it was meant to depict. It seemed to be a crouched bipedal figure with a beak, but any other detail had long been worn away.

Flying closer, he saw that at some time the figures had been connected by arched bridges, but most of that structure had fallen away and lay half-buried in the tall grass. He landed on the flat top of

a statue's head, the warm stone pleasant under his feet, and turned for a view of the valley. Traveling across the Three Worlds, he had seen plenty of ruins, but there was something about the way the statues were placed, the way the plain swept up to them, framed against the hills. Whoever had done this had seen the entire valley as a work of art.

Chime landed beside him, furling his wings. "Impressive, isn't it?" He managed to sound as if he had personally constructed it.

Moon thought impressive was a good word for it. "Is it part of the same city as the colony?"

Chime nodded. "Probably. The stone is worked in the same way."

Balm circled overhead, waiting impatiently, and Moon was hungry. He jumped off the statue, catching the air again.

They split up to hunt, but as Moon made his first pass, he heard a yelp. He pulled out of his dive and banked back around, startled to see Chime on the ground. He huddled over his wing. It didn't look broken but it was crumpled, as if he had landed badly and fouled it.

Moon hit the ground nearby with a dust-raising thump and started toward him. Chime snapped, "No, leave me alone!" and half-turned away.

Moon stopped, but he wasn't going to leave with Chime helpless on the ground, even if he was only winded from a bad impact. The high grass didn't allow for much visibility and the herds of grasseaters would draw predators.

A wing injury could be bad, and shifting to groundling would just transfer a break to Chime's arm or back, where it could be much worse. Moon knew he healed faster when he wasn't in groundling form, and assumed that was normal for all Raksura. He hoped it was normal.

Even if Chime was hurt, he was still lucky; Moon could carry him back to the colony, or send Balm for help if the wing was too damaged to move without splints. Moon had broken a small bone in his wing once, slamming into a rock wall while trying to avoid being eaten by the biggest branchspider he had ever seen. He had spent three days curled in a hollow tree, sick and shivering, waiting for it to heal enough that he could shift without crippling himself.

And he needed to get it straight in his head whether he wanted to leave the Indigo Cloud Court because he thought it was too late for him to belong here, or because he just bitterly resented the fact that nobody had found him before.

Balm landed beside him, calling out, “Chime? Are you all right?”

“Yes. Ow.” Sounding more disgruntled than hurt, Chime pushed to his feet, stumbled a little, and carefully extended the crumpled wing. His tail dragged along the ground in complete dejection. “I think it’s just... bruised.”

Moon looked down, distractedly digging his claws into the dirt, trying to conceal his expression. Bitter resentment or not, it was a relief that Chime wasn’t injured.

Balm must have misinterpreted his relief as something else. “Chime didn’t learn to fly until a couple of turns ago,” she said, a little embarrassed, apparently feeling she needed to excuse Chime’s behavior.

Moon was trying to stay out of this, but that was so odd he had to ask, “Why not?” He had thought Chime was his age. And Chime might be a little uncoordinated in flight, but he didn’t look unhealthy.

Still limping and trying to work his wing, Chime growled, “Because I’m a mentor.”

“I know that.” Moon didn’t quite suppress an irritated hiss. “If you don’t want to tell me, don’t.” He wasn’t going to be a permanent part of this court, and it wasn’t as if he needed to know.

“All right, fine.” Chime’s voice grated as he carefully extended his wing again. “I was born a mentor. But then three turns ago, I shifted, and—” he gestured helplessly at the wing, “—this happened.”

Moon hesitated warily, his first thought that Chime was making it up, or being sarcastic. But Balm’s expression was deeply uncomfortable. Suspiciously, he asked, “Are you serious?”

Chime sighed, waved a hand over his head, and almost tangled his claws in his own mane of spines. “Unfortunately, yes. Believe me, I wish it was a bad joke.”

Balm folded her arms, betraying some exasperation. “If you’d just make an effort, let Drift or Branch teach you—”

Chime’s hiss was pure derision. “I don’t need their kind of teaching.”

Moon was still stuck on the horror of the initial change. “That must have been...” He couldn’t conceive of how strange it would be, to shift and find your other body had changed, that you were different. Feeling inadequate, he finished, “...a shock.”

“You have no idea.” Chime’s shoulders slumped in relief. Moon wondered if too many of the others had reacted by telling him he

should just feel grateful for getting wings. Moon couldn't imagine anyone not wanting to fly once they learned what it was like, but that wouldn't make the sudden change any less horrifying. He knew, from shifting to groundling and back, that the weight of his wings, even when folded, drastically changed his balance, that his tail helped to compensate for that. An Arbora's body must be completely different, since it was designed for climbing and leaping. When Chime had first changed, he must have had to re-learn everything, even how to walk in his other form. And all the Arbora Moon had seen were shorter and more heavily built than Chime. So his groundling form could have changed, too, Moon thought, feeling the skin under his scales creep in uneasy sympathy. He hadn't known that could happen. He wished he didn't know it now.

Still depressed, Chime added, "Did you know that Aeriats really do have to sleep more than Arbora? I didn't. I thought it was a myth; I thought they were just lazy. In the afternoon, I can't get anything done. All I want to do is nap." He shrugged in unwilling resignation. "Flower thinks it was because of the shortage of warriors in the colony, that it's just something that happens."

"Are you still a shaman?" Moon asked. When Balm ruffled her spines in embarrassment and looked away, he realized it might be an insensitive question.

He was certain of it an instant later, when he could practically see Chime's spine stiffen. "That's not all there is to being a mentor."

"I didn't know mentors existed until—" Moon counted back. "Nine or so days ago."

"Oh, that's right. Sorry, I keep forgetting." Chime relaxed a little. "We're not just augurs and healers, we're historians, physicians. We keep the records of the colony, make sure the other castes have the knowledge they need."

"Then what's wrong with learning what you need to know to be a warrior?" Balm demanded, her tail lashing impatiently.

Chime hissed at her and turned away.

Moon felt he had to say, "She has a point."

Chime didn't respond for a moment, lifting and flexing his bad wing with a cautious wince. He finally said, "You've been alone all this time. How did you teach yourself to fly?" He waved a hand at the plain, the breeze bending the tall grass, the now-distant herds of grasseaters. "How to hunt? How did you know—"

It was Moon's turn to hiss in annoyance, and he paced away from

them, lashing his tail. It was turns too late for him to want sympathy from these people. “If you stop asking me about it, I’ll show you how to take down a grasseater without breaking your neck.”

He had only said it to make Chime angry and to shut him up. He didn’t expect him to perk up and say, “All right.”

Even as Moon explained the basics—grip the creature with your feet to leave your hands free, rip its throat out quickly before it has a chance to roll over on you, don’t attack anything too much bigger than you are—he didn’t expect Chime to listen. But Chime did, asking careful questions and prompting Moon to provide more detailed examples and advice, things he had learned for himself the hard way, and other knowledge picked up from the various groundling tribes he had hunted with.

Balm, tactfully, didn’t stay to watch or to enjoy being vindicated. She flew off to take a kill from the edge of one of the smaller herds, and then carried it away downwind to bleed it. Chime, after three false starts, managed to follow Moon’s example and take down a young looper bull. Moon wondered if Chime’s aversion to learning had more to do with being taught by people he had grown up with, who had known him only as a shaman, with abilities they didn’t have.

To eat, they took their kills back to the flat-topped head of the statue Moon had first landed on, high above any predators that might stalk the plain. The wind up there was strong enough to keep away the more persistent insects, and the view was still impressive.

When he finished eating, Moon, who had been looking forward to this since he had first seen the valley, leapt high into the air to circle around and dive into the deep part of the lake. Chime and Balm didn’t follow his example, but did venture into the shallows, swimming around the tall water grass near the bank. After a while, Chime actually relaxed enough to get into a mock-fight with Balm, both of them splashing and snarling loud enough to drive all the game to the far end of the valley.

When Moon swam back to see if they were really trying to kill each other, Chime tackled him. Since Chime’s claws were sheathed, Moon just grabbed him and went under, taking him out of the shallows and all the way down to the weedy bottom, some thirty paces down. He then shot back up. By the time they surfaced, Chime was wrapped around him, wings tightly tucked in, clinging with arms, legs, and tail. “I didn’t know we could do that!” he gasped.

“You learn something new every day,” Moon told him, grinning. Chime tried unsuccessfully to dunk him, and Balm stood in the

shallows, pointing and laughing.

If Moon had been alone, he would have spent the rest of the afternoon sleeping on the warm stone of the statue's head, but he was supposed to be a functioning member of the court and that meant each of them bringing another kill back. After this day, it didn't seem like such an insupportable burden.

They flew back to the herd, and Moon and Balm took their kills with no difficulty. They waited upwind while Chime tried to bleed his without ripping up the meat too much and losing all the organs.

Moon caught a scent on the wind that wasn't blood or viscera. He pivoted, studying the empty sky. "Did you smell that?"

"What?" Balm lifted her head, tasting the air. "No. What was it?"

It had just been a trace, there and gone almost too quickly to mark it. "Fell."

"There's been Fell taint in the air off and on since that ruler came to see Pearl." Balm showed her fangs in a grimace of disgust. "They must still be in the area, watching the court."

The wind came from the south, away from the colony. The Fell must be lurking out there somewhere; maybe this valley wasn't such a good place to nap in the sun after all. Moon asked, "Were you there? When the ruler came?"

Balm shook her head, her spines flaring. "No, I'm not in favor with Pearl. I'm Jade's..." She trailed off, looking up at Moon, suddenly uneasy.

It was the hesitation that did it. Spy, Moon thought. Spy is the word you're looking for. He had known that Chime and Balm had only come out here to keep an eye on him; that Balm was here specifically on Jade's behalf somehow made it... personal.

Chime landed next to them, dropping a carcass on the dry grass. He panted with exertion, proud and flustered with his success. "There, is that right? Can we go now?"

Moon turned away, picked up his own kill, and leapt into the air. Behind him, he heard Chime asking Balm, "Hey, what's wrong? What did you do?" Moon didn't listen for the answer.

Chapter Six

Moon reached the colony well ahead of Chime and Balm, finding and following the river back up the valley. Ashe circled the main structure, he identified the pillared terrace that belonged to the hunters by the hides drying on wooden racks. A dozen or so Arbora worked there, skinning something large and furry that had a double set of spiral horns. The place stunk of butchered meat and the acidic tang of whatever they used for tanning.

Moon landed and dumped the carcass on the paving, folded his wings, and shifted. He managed not to twitch when all the Arbora working in the court shifted too. He was going to have to get used to that.

They were all dressed roughly for the messy work, most wearing just ragged cloth smocks or leather kilts. All stopped their work to watch Moon with open curiosity. The one who stepped forward, eyeing the carcass as if he grudged its existence, said, “Well, you killed it. Did you bother to bleed—Oh, you did.” He had the heavyset build of most Arbora, and he was old, showing the signs of age that Moon was learning to recognize in Raksura. His hair was white and his bronze-brown skin had an ashy cast. Other than that he looked as tough as a boulder, with heavily muscled shoulders and a ridge of scar tissue circling his neck, as if something had tried to bite his head off. “I’m Bone,” he added, and kicked the carcass thoughtfully. “Do you want the hide? You’ve got first claim on it.”

“No. Give it to someone else.” It would have come in handy, but Moon hoped to be long gone before they could finish tanning it.

“Huh.” Bone looked as if he might argue, then subsided with a scowl.

That seemed to be it. Moon turned away, wanting to get out of there before Chime and Balm arrived. “Hey,” one of the hunters called out. Warily, he turned back. A woman, silver-gray threaded through her light-colored hair, sat on the steps and sharpened a skinning knife. She said, “Why are you staying down here in the Arboras’ bowers, instead of up there with the Aeriat?”

Moon suppressed an annoyed growl. He had had enough of this from the warriors; he didn't need to hear it here, too. He said, "Do you have a problem with it?"

She snorted with amusement. "Not me."

But Bone, still watching him, said, "That's going to make trouble for you. You should move up there with them. It'd go easier on you."

Moon shook his head, frustrated with all of it. All his turns trying to fit in had come to nothing, over and over again, and he was too weary to start the whole process again here. The Raksura could take him as he was. He said, "No, it wouldn't."

He caught movement overhead, and looked up to see Chime and Balm circling in. Moon shifted and jumped to the terrace roof, then up to the first ledge. He followed it around the outside of the building, to the passage that led to the back entrance into the teachers' hall.

He was looking for somewhere to be alone, but there were more people here than he had expected. The curtains over the doorways and stairs had been lifted back, and a group of men and women at the end of the hall worked with bone spindles and distaffs, spinning masses of beaten plant fiber into yarn. Near the shallow fountain, Petal and a couple of younger Arbora played with five very active babies, all just old enough to toddle on unsteady legs.

Moon headed for his bower, hoping no one would notice him. But Petal greeted him, waving. "Moon, did you have good hunting?"

"It was all right." Reluctantly, he stopped beside her. Before she could ask anything more, two figures, one green and one bright blue, crashed down the nearest stairway. They tumbled out onto the floor, spilling a few empty baskets and knocking over a clay jar.

Petal shouted, "Spring, Snow, stop that! What do you think is going to happen if you hurt your wings?"

It wasn't until the two figures rolled to a halt and separated that Moon realized they were young, half-sized warriors, one male and one female, as wild and awkward as fledgling raptors. They both sat up and shifted, turning into thin and gawky children on the edge of adolescence. They stared wide-eyed at Moon, as startled to see him as he was to see them.

Petal got to her feet, eyeing them with exasperated affection. "The girl is Spring and the boy is Snow," she told Moon. "They're from Amber's last clutch. She was Pearl's sister queen."

Amber was one of the queens who had died, Moon remembered. It seemed like he had heard about more dead Raksura than live ones.

He was trying to think of a polite response when something grabbed his leg. He looked down, bemused to see one of the Arbora toddlers had shifted and was now trying to climb him like a tree. The rest of the clutch rolled on the floor in play, keeping the other teachers busy.

“Oh, Speckle, don’t.” Petal made a grab for her and the little girl ducked away agilely, still climbing.

“Speckle?” Moon caught the baby and lifted her up. She immediately sank her claws into his shirt, looking up at him with big, liquid brown eyes. Her gold-brown scales and tiny spines were still soft, and she smelled like a combination of groundling baby and Raksura. Moon’s heart twisted, and he reminded himself he planned to leave eventually.

“It almost makes sense when you know the rest of the clutch is Glint, Glimmer, Pebble, and Shell,” Petal said, prying little claws out of Moon’s sleeve as she tried to coax the baby to let go. “Most of us like to give our clutches similar names.”

“Does that mean you’re related to Flower?” Moon asked, still distracted as the baby stubbornly tightened her grip on him.

Petal laughed. “Distantly. She’s much older than I am. Chime, though, is clutch-mate to Knell and Bell. Knell is leader of the soldiers, and Bell is a teacher. The other two were mentors, but they died from the lung disease.” She hesitated, suddenly self-conscious. “Chime wasn’t always a warrior.”

“He told me he used to be a mentor.” Moon ruffled Speckle’s frills. Keeping his attention on the baby, he asked casually, “Who is Balm related to?”

“She’s a warrior from a royal clutch, the same one Jade came from.” Sighing in exasperation, Petal tried to work her fingers under Speckle’s claws. “It’s not true, what they say about female warriors who come from royal clutches. They don’t all go mad because they think they’re failed queens.” She frowned a little and added, “It’s only happened to a few.”

So Jade had sent her clutch-mate to watch him? Or just to find out more about him and report back? Moon wasn’t sure what to make of it.

The warrior girl Spring was still watching them with wide eyes. She said suddenly, “There’s only two of us. The others died.”

“Where’s your clutch?” Snow demanded, half-hiding behind her.

Moon hesitated while Speckle gnawed on his knuckles with fortunately still-blunt baby teeth. He could accept the fact that Sorrow

hadn't been his mother, and that it was impossible for a consort to come from a clutch of Arbora. But it hadn't changed anything. "They died."

Petal managed to pry Speckle off Moon just as Flower hurried up the stairs from the common room. "Moon, good, you're back." She looked flustered and worried, her gossamer hair frazzled. "Pearl has called for a gathering."

"A gathering?" Petal looked startled, and not a little alarmed, which made Moon's hackles rise. She flicked a quick, worried glance at him. "Everyone?"

Flower gave her a grim nod. "Except the teachers who are watching the children, the soldiers guarding the lower entrances, and the hunters too far out to call back."

Or very fast consorts who make it up to that air shaft when no one is looking, Moon thought, preparing to fade into the crowd.

Flower fixed her gaze on Moon, as if reading his thought, and added firmly, "And you are specifically included."

Flower wanted Moon to come with her immediately, which he suspected meant she thought he might try to escape in the confusion. She was right, but since she had grabbed his arm and immediately towed him out of the hall to the main stairwell, there wasn't much opportunity for an unobtrusive exit.

People hurried in from the fields outside, and the outer terraces and courts. The crowd grew as they went up the stairs, higher and higher, much further up inside the building than Moon had been before. The steps were taller up here, almost too tall for the Arbora. It just confirmed Moon's growing belief that the groundlings who had built this place had greatly exaggerated views of their physical size. Some of the Arbora shifted and skittered along the walls, using their claws on the reliefs and chinks in the stone. Flower stayed in her groundling form, and Moon found himself reaching down to take her hand and steady her as she climbed.

"Thank you," she said, a little breathless. She glanced up at him, her brows quirked. "There's no need to be nervous."

Moon had thought he had kept his expression laconic, but maybe not. And he wasn't the only one who was nervous; her hands were cold as ice. "Unlike you?"

She gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Very unlike me."

The stairs took another turn, ending in a broad landing, and Moon was surprised to see Stone waiting there. As they reached him,

Stone leaned down to take Flower's other hand, and he and Moon lifted her up the last step. "I hate this damn place," Stone muttered.

"Really?" Flower pretended to look startled. "And you've kept your views to yourself all this time?"

"Why do you hate it?" Moon asked, ready for any distraction. Only one archway led off the landing, opening into a narrow passage lined with glow-moss. The Arbora crowded down into it, talking in whispers, nervously jostling each other. At least the closed-in feeling was alleviated by the high ceiling, nearly three times Moon's height.

Stone growled under his breath, causing several Arbora to give him wide berth. "It's a dead shell. It's not Raksura."

"No one knows what that means except you," Flower said, with the air of someone who had heard it all before. She turned to lead the way down the passage.

"That's the problem," Stone said after her.

As Moon followed her, Stone caught his arm. Twitchy already, Moon managed not to slam himself into the wall flinching away. As the Arbora flowed past them, Stone said softly, "Pearl is old, and she's ill, and she's stubborn."

Moon nodded, thinking what Stone was mainly telling him was, Don't panic.

Flower waited at the end of the passage where it opened into a larger chamber, and stood to one side so the others still filing in could get past her. "This is going to depend on a number of things that we have no control over," she said softly, as Moon and Stone reached her.

Stone grunted agreement and stepped past her into the room. Moon fought down one last urge to escape and followed as the other Arbora made way for them.

The place was large and cave-like, with no openings to the outside except for a shaft in the center of the high roof. Sometime in the past, when the pyramid had first been built, this could have been a throne room, or the central mystery chamber of a temple. Vines had crept down through the open shaft, but they were discolored by a creeping white moss.

Everyone here was in groundling form, and the Arbora still crowded in, filling in the floor space near the door. The Aeriats were already here, standing on two broad stone ledges above the doorway and to the right. They were as distinctive as the Arbora; all tall, the women slim, small-breasted, the men lean. Is that all the warriors? Moon wondered, a little shocked. Stone had said the colony didn't

have enough Aeriats, but there were only a third as many here as the Arbora. And there were still more soldiers, teachers, and hunters who weren't free to be here.

Moon saw Balm up on the ledge with the other warriors, pacing anxiously. Many of the warriors stared at him, and one dark-haired man glared with a familiar, angry intensity. That had to be River in his groundling form, and Moon was willing to bet the man next to him was Drift.

Chime stood on the floor with the Arbora, further down the wall with Petal and Bell, easily visible since he was nearly a head taller than most of them. Chime spotted Flower and made his way toward her, shouldering people aside, ignoring their objections.

The room went quiet, the murmur dying away. Moon scanned the shadows, trying to see what had caught the others' attention. Scent didn't tell him anything, since the whole place smelled of anxious Raksura.

Then, on a stone platform across the back of the room, a shadow moved. It spilled down the steps to the floor until a tall form stepped out of it into the light.

Her scales were brilliant gold, overlaid with a webbed pattern of deepest indigo blue. The frilled mane behind her head was like a golden sunburst, and there were more frills on the tips of her folded wings, on the triangle-shape at the end of her tail. She was a head taller than the tallest Aeriats, and wore only jewelry, a broad necklace with gold chains linking polished blue stones. As she moved into the center of the room, the air grew heavier. A stir rippled through all the assembled Raksura, an almost unconscious movement toward her. For the first time, Moon understood why Stone had said that queens had power over all of them; feeling the pull of it in himself turned him cold. I'm not one of them. I shouldn't be here.

In a voice soft and deep as night, she said, "Where is he?"

Moon's breath caught in his chest. Leaving, he thought, turning for the door. He would have made it, but Stone was fast even as a groundling, and caught his wrist.

Rather than be hauled forward like a criminal, Moon didn't resist. He let Stone pull him to the front of the crowd, to the empty space in front of Pearl. As Stone let him go, Moon tried to shift, meaning to fly straight up the air shaft.

Nothing happened.

Moon's mouth went dry. So Stone hadn't exaggerated; she could

keep them from shifting. He wished he knew if she was doing it to everyone, or just him.

Stone's voice was neutral, his tone giving nothing away. "Pearl, this is Moon."

She beckoned him forward with one deceptively delicate hand. Her claws were longer than his, and she wore rings on each finger, thick bands of gold woven with copper and silver.

It wasn't until the back of her hand brushed his cheek that Moon realized he had taken two steps toward her, that he was within her reach. Her claws moved through his hair, the touch too light to scratch, and she cupped the back of his head, drawing him closer.

Moon looked into her eyes, heavy-lidded, sea-blue, and fathoms-deep, drawing him in. Her scent was strong and musky, but there was a trace of bitterness under it, too faint for him to place. It brought him back to his senses abruptly, and he tried to pull away from her. But sudden heat warmed his body, the tension flowing out of his spine.

That she could keep them all from shifting meant she was connected to them somehow, through mind or heart or something else, and Moon should have realized that. Should have realized the connection could go both ways. For a moment it was as if he was part of every other Raksura in the room, and he leaned toward her.

Then, as if she had judged it for the exact moment she felt his resistance fade, she said, "This was the best you could do."

Her tone was calm, the warm purr of her voice unchanged. Moon blinked, so caught in her spell that for a heartbeat he didn't understand. The whole room seemed to take a startled breath.

In that same tone, she continued, "A solitary, with no bloodline."

Understanding hit him like a sudden slap. He jerked backward, but her hold on him tightened, her claws digging into his skin. Moon twisted out of her grip, the claws opening cuts across the back of his neck, snagging in the collar of his shirt. He fell back a few steps, out of her reach, baring his teeth.

Her lip curled, showing her fangs, and her tail lashed; growls echoed from the assembled warriors perched on the ledges, as if she was the one who had been insulted.

Moon spun on his heel, hissing up at them, furious and humiliated and ready to fight everybody in the room. The growls stopped as the warriors stirred uneasily. Apparently nobody wanted to fight, at least not while they were all trapped in groundling form.

“I didn’t bring him for you,” Stone said, his voice dry and acid in the silence.

The words broke the spell. Moon took a sharp breath, trying to clear his head and make himself think. He couldn’t feel that pull toward Pearl anymore, that connection to the others. There and gone so briefly, it had still left an empty place in his chest, as if something had been torn out of him. It was pure cruelty to let him feel that, to draw him into that, just to rip him away.

Pearl paced, her tail still lashing, her mane rippling with agitation. Cold edged her voice as she told Stone, “Solitaries live the way they do for a reason.”

Stone watched her, unmoved and unimpressed. “He wasn’t a solitary by choice. I told you how I found him.”

“And you have only his word for that.” Pearl stopped, half turning to show Stone her profile, as if she was reluctant to confront him. “What did you have to give him to bring him here?”

That was another slap. Moon gritted his teeth, looking away. Everything he had taken from them—food, the clothes he was wearing, even Stone’s protection while he was poisoned—flashed through his head. He had accepted it all with the idea that he would act as one of their warriors; Pearl had to know that. She wanted to drive him away, and he knew why.

That Moon was here as a potential consort for Jade somehow gave the younger queen power, taking it away from Pearl. Moon hissed under his breath. If Pearl wanted to drive him out, she was going to have to try a lot harder than this.

As if called by his thought, another voice, sharp with irony, said, “I’ve left gifts. He’s taken none of them.” The warriors on the ledge parted abruptly for a light blue form, the only other Raksura in the room who hadn’t shifted to groundling. She stepped off the ledge and landed lightly on the paving. She was smaller than Pearl, the same height as the other warriors. The silver-gray pattern overlaying her scales was less complex than Pearl’s brilliant indigo, and the frilly spines of her mane weren’t as elaborate. Her jewelry was silver, rings, armbands, and bracelets, and a belt worn low above the hips with polished ovals of amethyst and opal. Moon had only caught two glimpses of her before, but this was clearly Jade.

She stalked forward, radiating barely contained irritation, her gaze on Pearl. “The things he accepted from the Arbora are only what they would give in hospitality to any visitor.” Her voice hardened into a snarl. “Try your claws on me, why don’t you.”

Pearl moved away from her, her lip curling in contempt. "You're a child. You have no responsibility in this court and you've made no attempt to assume any."

Jade's laugh held little amusement. "You say that as if it's what you want."

Stone broke the moment. "That isn't what we came here to discuss. The Arbora want to go to a new colony. Our lines haven't flourished here, and you know it as well as the rest of us do. All the consorts of my line are dead, Rain is dead, and your last clutch didn't survive to—"

Pearl rounded on him, hissing. "I don't need you to remind me of that!"

Evenly, unaffected by her anger, Stone said, "Then what do you need?"

After a moment she stepped away from him, shaking her head. "We have too many Arbora and too few Aeriats. We can't leave this place, not now." Her hands curled into fists. "I've waited too long. I take the blame for that."

Flower stepped forward and suddenly had the attention of the entire room. It gave Moon some insight into just how much power the mentors actually held. Among all the larger Arbora and the tall warriors, Flower should have been a slight, insignificant figure, but every Raksura here turned to listen. She said, "It's not too late. There are ways around the lack of Aeriats. We don't all have to go at once. We can make the journey in stages."

Pearl hesitated, though Moon couldn't tell if she was giving the suggestion serious thought or not. Then she paced away. "It's too dangerous. We would die in stages."

His voice tight with irony, Stone said, "We're dying here, and that started before you let the Fell in."

Pearl turned toward him, her mane flaring in challenge. "What do you want from me?"

"You know what I want." Stone let the words hang in a fraught silence. When Pearl looked away, he said, "I'll settle for your word that you'll agree to move the court if I can get the means to transport the Arbora safely."

Pearl laughed, more annoyed than amused. "Your plan is ridiculous," she said, sounding exasperated. "I think your mind has finally turned."

Stone smiled, showing his teeth. It was somehow a far more threatening gesture than it should have been, and a ripple of unease went through the ranks of warriors. But he only said, "Then you have nothing to worry about."

Pearl watched him a moment more, then she turned her gaze to Moon, contempt in every line of her body. "I want your solitary gone from this court."

Moon glared narrowly back at her and tried to shift, tried it with everything he had. He felt the change gather in his body, felt it burn in his chest, but he couldn't push past whatever power Pearl still held over him. But when he said, "Then make me leave," it came out in the deeper rasp of his shifted voice.

Pearl's face twisted into a snarl. "Get out of my sight!"

That he was willing to do. Moon snarled and turned for the door, barely noticing as the Arbora scattered out of his way. He strode down the passage to the landing, every step further away from Pearl's presence a relief. The others came out behind him, and he pounded down the stairs until he felt the pressure in his chest ease and knew he could shift again.

He left the stairs at the next landing, and headed blindly down a corridor until he found an opening to the outside. He shifted and jumped out, meaning to glide down to the foot of the pyramid. His head still swam from the effort of trying to shift against Pearl's restraint, his heart pounded with rage.

Distracted, he sensed something above him and snapped into a sideways roll. A dark green warrior shot past him, his stooping dive turning into an awkward tumble. Moon felt his lips pull back from his fangs in a silent snarl. They weren't high enough in the air to play this game.

He turned back toward the pyramid and landed on a broad ledge. Hissing angrily, the warrior banked around and tried to angle in at him, his wings beating hard. Idiot, Moon thought.

Moon leapt up, caught the warrior's ankle and yanked him out of the air. The hissing turned into an outraged yowl, cut off abruptly as Moon swung him against the upper ledge. The warrior snapped his wings in to protect them and tried to dig his claws into the stone to scabble away. Moon pulled him down, caught him by the throat, and pinned him to the wall. The warrior bared his fangs; he could have sunk his claws into Moon's wrists, or lifted a foot and tried to disembowel him. Moon should have torn his throat out.

Instead, he followed an instinct he didn't know he had, and drew himself up, flared his spines out, and leaned in. The warrior's eyes went narrow as he tried to avoid Moon's gaze. Then his spines, crushed against the stone, began to wilt as the furious resistance leaked out of his body. Knowing his point was made, Moon said softly, "Don't do that again."

The warrior jerked his head in response. Moon released his throat and stepped back. He half-expected to be tackled off the ledge and for it all to start over again, but instead the warrior shifted to groundling. He was a lanky boy, turns younger than Moon, with a shock of red hair, dark copper skin, and a deeply embarrassed expression.

Several warriors circled the air above them, and Moon was sure two of them were River and Drift. No one else dove for him. Moon turned and leapt off the ledge again.

He glided down toward the teachers' court. As he landed on the soft grass, he startled a flock of tiny flying lizards. They burst into alarmed retreat in a flurry of gold and violet wings.

Moon shifted back to groundling, and there he stopped, leaning one hand against the gritty, moss-covered stone of a pillar. He wanted to get out of this place. He wanted to fly in the cool air or float in the river, but he didn't want anyone to think for one heartbeat that he had run away. At least there's no question of fitting in anymore, he told himself bitterly. That bird had flown a long time ago.

Stone's great dark form landed in the center of the court, crushing some flowering bushes and almost flattening a small tree. He set Flower on her feet and then shifted to groundling.

"That went well," Flower said dryly, as they started toward Moon. She winced. "Moon, you're still bleeding."

"Let me see." Stone reached for him. Moon jerked away with a half-voiced snarl. Stone cuffed him in the head so hard Moon stumbled into the pillar. "Stop that. And don't shift," Stone snapped.

Moon subsided, unwillingly, remembering that he really didn't want to fight Stone. Flower hurried away, disappearing through the archway into the common room. Stone took Moon's shoulder and turned him around, pushing his head down to look at the cuts.

"Ow," Moon muttered.

"You shut up. Flower—"

"Here." Flower was back, handing Stone a wet cloth that smelled of something earthy.

Stone pressed it to the back of Moon's neck. Whatever was on it stung at first, then cooled the cuts. Stone said, quietly, "Pearl isn't... It's not supposed to be that way."

Moon set his jaw. "You said she was sick, not..." So bitterly angry that she was blind to everything. "What's wrong with her?"

"We don't know." Flower leaned on the pillar, looking up at him, a sad twist to her mouth. Other Arbora had reached the court, gathering in the common room and talking in soft, worried voices. "It could be disease, or just all the loss. Her last two queens' clutches, the ones that should have given Jade consorts and sister queens, were stillborn. Then Rain died. He was the last of the consorts of her generation."

"It isn't always this bad." Stone sounded weary. "She was better yesterday." To Flower, he said, "We need to make plans. Send someone to get the maps."

"Petal already has." Flower tugged on Stone's arm. "That should be enough. The grenilvine works quickly."

Stone pulled the cloth away and stepped back. Moon turned around, feeling the back of his neck, startled to find scabs instead of open cuts. Flower took the blood-stained cloth away from Stone and stood on her tiptoes to look at the wound. She nodded to herself, patted Moon on the arm, and walked back inside.

Stone watched him, giving nothing away. "Are you staying?"

Moon had regained enough self-control not to snarl the answer. "I said I would."

Stone's smile was a thin line. "Yes, you did." He turned away, and Moon followed him into the common room.

He caught many sideways glances, worried, uncomfortable, unreadable. Petal, Rill, and several others pulled cushions and mats out of the way, clearing a large space on the floor. More Arbora came in; Moon recognized Knell, the leader of the soldiers, and Bone and some of the other hunters. Balm and several other warriors followed them in; they looked uneasy, but no one objected to their presence.

Then Chime and Bell carried in a big, rolled-up hide, nearly twelve paces long. They put it down on the floor and unrolled it, pulling the edges to spread it out.

Moon stepped closer, unwillingly interested. It was a map, carefully drawn in black, blue, green, and red inks on the soft surface of the hide. Everything was drawn in broad strokes, with mountains, rivers, and coastlines sketched in lightly. He had never seen a map

this large, showing such a vast area of the Three Worlds.

“We’re here.” Stone stepped out onto the map and tapped a spot with his foot. It was a star shape next to the blue line of a river. “From here, I could get across and out of the river valleys in three or four days.” His brows drew together as he studied the faded ink below his feet. “That’s eleven or twelve days for our warriors, more when they’re carrying Arbora. And we still have a long way to go after that.”

“Eleven?” Distracted, Moon padded across the map, looking for the Cordans’ valley so he could trace their route here. Stone’s pace, judging by the trip from Sky Copper, was one day to what would have been three at Moon’s pace. “You mean nine.”

“I mean eleven,” Stone said. “Consorts and queens fly faster than full grown warriors. And I wouldn’t be pushing them as hard as I pushed you. You’ll get faster as you get older and bigger; they won’t.”

Moon grimaced—something else he hadn’t realized. He had noticed that Chime and Balm flew at a more leisurely pace, but had thought that was just because they hadn’t been in a hurry. He found the spot that might be the Cordans’ river and followed it up into the vague outlines of a mountain range.

Balm said, “But Pearl was right. We have more Arbora than Aeriati, plus we’d have to carry supplies for the journey, and everything we’ll need at the new colony. It would be taking an awful chance to split up the court like that.”

Knell the soldier seconded that with a grim nod. He was powerfully built like Bone, but not nearly as grizzled and scarred. “It would take several trips, and we’d be vulnerable both here and at the new place. It would give the Fell plenty of time to attack.”

Bone scratched the scar on his chest. “You could abandon most of us.”

Several people hissed at him, Aeriati and Arbora. Stone gave him a bored look. “And we could all eat each other before the Fell arrive. That would solve our problems, too.”

“Now that we’re done with the daft suggestions,” Flower prompted. “Anyone have anything sensible to say?”

Moon crouched to examine the area where he thought Star Aster might be, but the places indicated were all marked with glyphs in a language he couldn’t read. He said to Stone, “So you’re thinking of something to transport everyone in. Like a boat?” Though navigating an unknown river could be almost as slow and dangerous as walking.

One of the smaller Arbora, sitting at the edge of the map, asked, “What’s a boat?”

“It’s a thing some races of groundlings use to travel on water,” Petal explained.

And there’s that, Moon thought wryly. None of the Raksura would know how to sail or navigate a river.

But Stone said, “Like a boat.” He turned, taking another pace across the map. “Have you ever heard of the Yellow Sea?”

Moon watched him, frowning. “No.”

Flower walked over to stand next to Stone, thoughtfully twisting a lock of her hair. “It’s a shallow sea, very shallow, barely a few paces deep in some stretches. Something in the water makes everything yellow—the sand, the plants.”

Stone nudged a spot on the map with his foot. “There’s a groundling kingdom out there, a remnant of one of the flying island empires. They have flying boats. Raksura have treated with them before, and I’ve been out there a few times.”

Flower nodded slowly. “That could work, if the boats are large enough.” She lifted a brow, giving Stone an annoyed look. “How long have you had this in mind?”

“Not long.” He nodded to Moon. “When I went back to your flying island, I looked at the books you found. That got me thinking about other possibilities than just carrying the Arbora.”

Moon shrugged noncommittally. He remembered the pictures of the people with tentacles. If the flying boats were more manageable than carriages on the backs of giant birds, it might work.

“You want to transport the Arbora in a flying boat?” Knell said, staring at Stone as if he had shifted and managed to end up with a second head.

Stone lifted his gray brows, fixing a concentrated stare on Knell. “Why not?”

“I don’t know.” Knell stepped back off the map, making a helpless gesture. “It sounds crazy.”

“We could still be attacked while we’re moving,” one of the other soldiers said uncertainly.

Flower still stared down at the blot of delicate color that marked the Yellow Sea, brows knit in concentration. “We could be attacked while moving in the conventional way. With these flying boats, we

could move all at once, and perhaps faster, and the warriors would be free to fight.”

“And we could bring more of our belongings,” Petal said. She had taken a seat at the edge of the map, her arms wrapped around her knees. “Like the anvils for metal-working. I couldn’t think how we were going to move those.”

There was a murmur of agreement from around the room.

“How do we get their boats?” a younger male warrior asked, sounding baffled by the whole idea. “Steal them?”

“You could buy them,” Moon pointed out, exasperated. These people were hopeless. “You’ve got silk cloth, furs, metals, gems. You could buy anything you wanted in most of the civilized cities in the Three Worlds.”

Stone gave the young warrior the I can’t be bothered to deal with your stupidity look Moon knew well from their travels together, then said to the rest of the gathering, “We could bargain to use the boats just for the journey. It’s not like we’ll need the things once we get where we’re going. Like Moon said, we have goods we can offer them in exchange.”

“We have to try.” Flower glanced at Stone. “Will you go to speak to them?”

“I’ll go,” a new voice said. It was Jade, standing in the outer doorway. She was still in her other form, her wings folded, so weary that her mane was nearly flat. Moon felt everyone looking at him, or trying not to look at him, and tried not to react. Jade continued, “Stone should be here if the Fell return. And I’ve heard the stories about the Yellow Sea. Solace and Sable and a flight of warriors first visited the groundlings there.” She lowered her head, the scales on her forehead rippling as she frowned. “They were a sister queen and her consort, from an earlier generation.”

Moon knew she was talking to him; everyone else had to know the story already. Before he could decide whether to reply, Flower cleared her throat and said, “You’ll need to take some warriors, so that would make it a two day flight, but we still need time to pack up the colony. Historically, we’re supposed to be able to migrate at a moment’s notice, but I think that’s a bit optimistic since we haven’t actually had to do it for generations.”

Jade nodded. “And we are asking the Yellow Sea groundlings to trust us with their boats, even though we’re going to offer them payment. The request will sound better coming from a queen.” She

added, more grimly, "And it will get me out of Pearl's way."

"There's a thought." Stone eyed Moon in a way Moon didn't like. He wasn't surprised when Stone said, "I want you to go with her."

The room was very quiet. Moon knew he didn't have a choice. Refusing would mean embarrassing Jade in front of her people. Considering his own recent public humiliation, he had no intention of inflicting that on anyone else. Especially since she had defended him to Pearl. Moon said, "I'll go."

There was a collective breath of relief.

Chime, who had managed to keep quiet up to this point, said, "Has anyone thought about the fact that even if we get the boats, Pearl didn't agree to leave?"

"Yes, we've thought of that." Stone's gaze was on the map. "I'll deal with it."

Moon thought that sounded like a threat, but he admitted that he wasn't the best judge.

After that, the talk turned to the details of the journey, who else Jade would take with her, what Stone had found the last time he had visited there, the possible dangers along the way, and what they would offer the Yellow Sea groundlings. Clouds had come in from the north, and a light rain had started, pattering the leaves in the court. Moon sat beside the archway, just out of reach of the rain, and worked on listening unobtrusively, something he thought he hadn't done enough of lately.

Finally Jade and the other Aeriats left for the upper levels of the colony, Stone disappeared, and the Arbora broke up into groups to talk about moving the court. Moon slipped away, going back up the stairs to the bowers.

There were still too many people around, so he went up to one of the less-occupied halls, where a doorway to the outside overlooked the river. He shifted and climbed up the wall above the archway, looped his tail around one of the stone projections there and hung upside down from it, coiling up to wrap his wings around himself. He needed to think, and had always found this a particularly restful position to do it in. He had no idea if this was acceptable Raksuran behavior, not that it mattered. Practically spitting in the queen's face probably isn't acceptable either. He was also well above eye level here, and in the shadow above the doorway; if she sent any warriors to force him to leave the court, it was just as well if they couldn't find him. He didn't want to kill anybody and interfere with Stone's plans.

The journey tomorrow with Jade would be an uncomfortable experience. He didn't know if she could do to him what Pearl had done—draw him into that bond—or if it was only something that the reigning queen could do. He had no intention of ever being within Pearl's reach again, and Jade... now he knew to be wary. He didn't think either one of them could keep him in that state against his will, but Pearl had seduced him so easily. He didn't want to fall into that trap again.

After a time, he realized someone was nearby. He pulled the edge of his wing down to see Flower sitting cross-legged on the floor below him, looking out at the river. Without looking up, she said, "Don't mind me. I use this window for augury when the wind is from the south. I doubt anyone else would have seen you up there."

Moon twisted around to look out. The plume trees along the river bank waved slightly in the breeze, and higher up above the valley a small flock of yellow birds swooped and dived, bright against the gray clouds. "What are you auguring?"

"The prospects for your trip to the Golden Isles. I'm trying to read it out of the effect of the wind on those birds."

A bird swooped low, catching an updraft to soar back up to where the others circled. The only portent Moon could read was a bad one for the insects caught in the breeze. "Does it look good?"

"It says that the journey should be made, but then we knew that already. It says that Stone is right, that the Islanders are likely to listen to Jade's request. What it says about the outcome of the journey... is confusing, and useless." Flower frowned absently. "Can I ask you a question?"

This is why you should keep your mouth shut, Moon told himself, but fair was fair. "Yes."

Her eyes still on the birds, she said, "When did you stop looking for others?"

Moon couldn't pretend not to know what she meant. "A long time ago." He wondered if she could read the truth of his answers in the wind, in the way the birds banked and tilted their wings. To deflect further questions on that topic, he added, "I lived in a lot of groundling cities."

She nodded slowly. "Most groundlings aren't meant to live alone either, I suppose. But then we're born in fives, and clutches are always raised together. Or at least, that's the way it's supposed to work."

"So we are born like groundlings. Not in... eggs." Moon had been

wondering. Five births at once seemed a lot for a groundling woman.

Flower did him the courtesy of not looking incredulous at his ignorance. “Yes, we are born like groundlings. But our young are smaller, though they do grow more quickly, and can walk and climb much faster than most groundlings.” She smiled. “It’s why the teachers always look so tired.”

Moon let his wings unfurl and hang down, stretching. The scratches from Pearl’s claws had nearly vanished, and barely pulled at his scales. “So why is it such a terrible thing to be a solitary?”

She lifted her brows, considering the question. “We’re not meant to live alone. It’s generally assumed that Raksura who do were forced to leave their court because of fighting or other unwanted behavior.” She leaned back to look up at him. “Since young consorts are prized above any other birth except for queens, it just makes it look worse.”

Well, that figures, Moon thought dryly. He had, after all, no proof whatsoever that he hadn’t been thrown out of a court—except for his encompassing lack of knowledge about all things Raksuran, which Stone at least could vouch for.

Flower’s mouth was a rueful line. “Stone said there were four Arbora with you that didn’t survive. I suppose, if the warrior did steal you, she might have brought the others along to keep you company. But if she was escaping some disaster, she might have just grabbed you and as many other children as she could manage.”

Not that that was any better. “So if we’re born in fives, there was at least one more of their clutch that she left behind to die so she could bring me.”

“I was actually trying to be comforting.” Flower sighed, and there was something far away in her eyes. “Moon, there’s something I don’t think you know. Queens are born with power, but a consort’s power comes with age. When you spoke in your shifted voice to Pearl—Only a consort coming into maturity could have done that.”

Moon felt mature already. Most days, he felt elderly. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter.” Flower stood, her shabby skirt falling into place around her. “We don’t use magic; we’re made of magic, and you can’t run away from that.”

Watching her walk away, Moon thought, I can try.

Chapter Seven

They were to start for the Yellow Sea at dawn the next morning. Moon didn't have much in the way of preparations to make. He borrowed a small cloth pack from Petal, just large enough to carry his old clothes and some dried meat and fruit she insisted he take. He didn't have anything else to carry, though he was starting to covet the knife and belt, still in the pile of refused gifts outside his bower. It wasn't as if he needed a knife in his shifted form, but he was used to having one as a groundling, and you never knew when it would come in handy. But he didn't weaken enough to take it.

Before first light, Moon flew far enough away to be out of the hunters' range and took a kill, a small grasseater. He purposefully overate, knowing he would need it for two long days of flight. It was still dark when he got back to the colony, so he stretched out on a ledge, pillowed his head on his pack, and napped.

The gray dawn light roused him, and he woke to see a group gathering on one of the terraced platforms below the pyramid. Stone and Flower were there in groundling form, plus Chime, Balm, and Jade, and three of the warriors who had come to the teachers' common room with her yesterday.

Moon jumped off the ledge and glided down toward the platform. He landed just in time to hear one of the warriors say, "He's probably run off. How long are we supposed to..." The words trailed off as Moon touched down on the paving and folded his wings.

"Wait?" Stone finished mercilessly. Chime gave the offender a derisive smile, Flower winced, Jade kept her expression blank, and everyone else looked uncomfortable. Impervious, Stone asked Moon, "You ready?"

Moon shifted to groundling, since everyone else was, and shrugged. Flower gave Stone a repressive look and introduced the three other warriors. "Moon, this is Branch, Root, and Song."

Song was female, younger and a little smaller than Balm, but she had the same warm, dark skin and curling honey hair, as if they might be related. Root was the one who had speculated that Moon had run

off, and also the one who had asked yesterday about stealing the flying boats from their groundling owners. He and Branch looked enough alike to be clutch-mates. Both had reddish-brown hair and copper skin, not unlike the young warrior who had attacked Moon yesterday, but in more subdued shades. If they were from a related clutch, that was just Moon's luck. Root was typically slender but Branch had a bigger, broader build, which might mean his shifted form was larger. That could be a problem, Moon thought, resigned to trouble.

Moon had no idea what his chances were in a fight against a larger male warrior, or a group of warriors. What worried him the most was that he had never had a real fight in his shifted form that wasn't to the death. Play-wrestling his Arbora siblings with claws carefully sheathed had been his last experience with it, and he had never fought just for dominance or to make a point.

But he had no intention of letting anyone else use him to make a point.

Jade told Stone and Flower, "We'll be back as soon as possible. If we're delayed more than a few days, I'll send someone as messenger."

"Take care," Flower said, with a worried smile.

Everyone shifted, Moon following a beat behind the others. Stone didn't say anything, but Moon was aware that he watched them, long after they leapt into the air and flew toward the west.

They flew all day, passing the point where the hilly jungle gradually gave way to flat coastal plain. As the afternoon became evening, Moon saw the plain had turned to marshland, with bright green grass and tall elegant birds undisturbed by their passage high overhead. In the distance the sea was a yellow haze.

When they reached it, the setting sun made the yellow of the water even more brilliant. The waves rolled up a wide beach bordered by low dunes and a band of yellow vegetation. The sand glinted with metallic and crystalline reflections. Jade had followed Stone's directions well, and they reached the coast only a short distance away from the first landmark: a ruin rising up from the water, about a hundred paces out from the land.

Moon landed on the beach, shifted, and stretched. He wasn't that tired; he had grown used to keeping up with Stone, and this hadn't been very strenuous flying. It was also warmer here, despite the strong wind off the sea, and the sand was hot under his feet. He walked toward the waves as the others landed a short distance away.

From the look of this ruin, the groundlings who had built the blocky pyramid and the statues in the valley hadn't made it as far as this coast. The structure was a series of big platforms, placed as if forming a circular stairway up to the sky, each roofless but ringed by tall thin columns linked by delicate arches. It was all made of metal and covered with verdigris, and the supporting posts in the water were heavily encrusted with little yellow barnacles. Moon reached the waterline and stepped onto the wet sand, letting the frothy edge of the waves run over his feet. The sky was tossed with clouds; a haze of rain fell far off to the south.

A little way up the beach, the others had gathered into a group to talk. Moon kept part of his attention on them, while he watched the waves suck sand from around his toes.

Chime came over to Moon, slogging through the loose sand. He stopped a few paces away and said abruptly, "Are you speaking to me?"

"What?" Moon stared at him, startled out of his mood. "Yes."

"You've barely spoken to anyone except Stone since what happened with Pearl."

Moon scratched his head, watching the last of the light glitter on the water. That wasn't quite true, but he could see how it would look that way to Chime. "I didn't have anything to say."

"Somehow I find that hard to believe." Chime folded his arms, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably. "What Pearl did was unacceptable, even if you're a..."

"Groundling-eating solitary," Moon supplied.

"Groundling-eating solitary, she shouldn't have behaved that way. Since you were brought to the court by Stone... The groundling-eating part was sarcasm, yes?"

Moon gave in. Chime seemed to be offering friendship, in his own way, and he wasn't going to turn that down. They were both outsiders among the Aeriati, and Chime seemed more out of place at times than Moon did. He just said, "Speaking of eating, let's go look for dinner."

They found tidal pools farther up the beach, in the rocky flats at the edge of the yellow scrub. The shallow pools had trapped fish, crabs, and other shelled creatures, and some water lizards, coming in to feed. The fish were too small to be more than a snack, but the lizards would make a more substantial meal. Moon shifted and slipped from pool to pool, catching surprised lizards, breaking their necks, and tossing them out for Chime to collect. They also found small

patches of metal-mud, which Chime had heard about but never seen before. It was good for making colors for pottery, and Moon's favorite groundlings, the Hassi, had also used it when they hunted on the forest floor. Once it dried on skin or scales, the metallic odor disguised your own scent. It also burned easily, something that Chime seemed to find fascinating.

The others all explored the ruin or the beach. They were divided into two camps, with Moon on one side, and everybody else on the other. Or two and a half camps, since Chime hovered in the middle.

When Root and Song wandered over to try their luck in the pools, Moon and Chime carried their catch over to the ruin, landing on a platform about halfway up the structure. As a place to camp it wasn't ideal. There was no real shelter; the slender pillars didn't provide any windbreak. But the metal was hot from the day's sun and felt pleasant on Moon's scales, and the elevation made it difficult for anything to come at them from the shore. For one night, it wouldn't be a problem.

"These are a little chewy," Chime commented.

"Save the guts," Moon told him, "If we throw them in the water, they might attract something bigger."

Chime glanced warily down at the waves washing against the pillars. "How big?"

Jade dropped onto the platform. Moon embarrassed himself dramatically by scrambling sideways and almost leaping off into the water before he could stop himself. It wasn't that it was her; he had never reacted well to being startled while eating. When he was alone, it was when he was at his most vulnerable.

Jade stared at him warily. When he self-consciously sat down again, she said, "I wanted to ask you something." She knelt gracefully and unfolded a leather packet. "I know all groundling cities are different, but do you have any idea how many of these I should offer?"

Moon leaned forward, frowning in consternation as big, lumpy, white objects spilled out of the packet. It took him a moment to realize they were pearls, huge ones. He flicked one with a claw, and it caught the light, reflecting soft iridescent blues, reds, greens. They had to be from the deepwater kingdoms, further out into the seas than Moon had ever ventured. "It'll depend," he told her. If the Yellow Sea groundlings traded with any waterlings, they might already have access to pearls like these. But this was still something they could trade anywhere along the Crescent Coast, to the Kish empire, the Hurrians. He was trying to remember the prices in Kishan coin that

the Abascene traders had charged for passage on their ships, and mentally convert it to what the pearls were probably worth. And account for the fact that they were bargaining for flying boats that had to be worth more than any ordinary barge. "Start with five of the medium-sized ones. That's probably low, but not insulting."

Jade had begun to look impatient, but now her expression cleared. "I see. Thank you."

Still chewing on lizard meat, Chime asked her, "What if they don't want to trust us with their boats? If they say no, we're stuck."

Jade weighed the pearls in her hand thoughtfully. "Stone doesn't think they will."

Stone isn't always right, Moon thought, but kept it to himself. If this didn't work, they would have to move the court the hard way, and he wondered if Jade had thought about that. Moving a large group over land wasn't impossible, just difficult and dangerous; groundlings did it all the time. He was about to say this when he caught something on the wind.

It was just a faint trace of other, of something that wasn't sand, salt, or dead fish and lizards. Moon pushed to his feet, just as Jade said, "Did you smell that?"

Moon took a deep breath, his mouth open to draw the air past the sensitive spots in his cheeks and throat. "It's gone now."

Jade stood, the strong wind catching at her frills. "At least there's no mistaking the direction."

Chime twisted around, looking worriedly out to sea. "Was it Fell?"

"Probably," Moon said, at the same time Jade answered, "Maybe." Moon turned to look inland. With the wind off the sea so strong, anything could come at them from the land. His eyes caught movement against the darkening sky, but it was only Branch and Balm, circling high above the beach.

Jade said, "Fell wouldn't be out at sea, not unless there was something they really wanted." She was right about that; Fell would be just as vulnerable on long flights over water as Raksura.

"So they're after us?" Chime looked up at her, his face uneasy. "Pearl wouldn't tell them where we were going. Would she?"

"She's not that far gone." Jade sounded weary and disgusted. "And Stone wouldn't let them in to speak to her. It has to be a coincidence."

“A coincidence.” Moon couldn’t help himself. “Like Sky Copper being destroyed before they could accept Stone’s offer of alliance.”

Jade’s frills stiffened and she said, flatly, “I didn’t know you took that much of an interest.”

I didn’t know I did, either, Moon thought. He didn’t have another answer. He looked back toward the beach, watching the waves rolling up. After a moment, Jade hissed, picked up her bundle of pearls, and jumped off the platform.

Chime sighed pointedly, as if the effort of putting up with them was almost too much. “I’m not going to say anything,” he began, “But —”

“Don’t,” Moon said. “Just don’t.”

Something woke Moon, late into the night. He opened his eyes and didn’t move, trying to sense what it was. He was on the middle platform, lying on his side in groundling form to conserve his strength. The wind was cool, the dark sky streaked with clouds. Something warm leaned against his back, and something heavy lay across his waist. It took him a moment to identify it as Chime’s tail. Bemused, he thought, That’s... different.

Moon was fairly certain Chime had gone to sleep as a groundling and, from his steady breathing, Moon could tell he wasn’t awake. He shifted in his sleep? Moon had never done that, but then, much of the time his survival had depended on not doing that.

Chime was also still partly a mentor. He sensed something that made him shift in his sleep.

Moon eased up on one elbow. He hadn’t been included in the discussion about who stood guard when, and so had left the others to it. Now he saw Balm perched on the edge of the highest platform in her shifted form, leaning against one of the slender pillars, looking out to sea. The line of her body was tense, as if she searched the sky for something.

Clouds covered the waning moon, reflecting some of its light. The constant motion of the waves made it hard to pick out movement. Moon couldn’t scent Fell, but there was a strange odor on the wind, a slightly bitter tang.

Balm hissed a warning, flattening herself to the platform. An instant later a dark shape moved across the clouds. Moon dropped flat, and felt Chime jerk awake beside him. Moon squeezed his tail, whispering, “Don’t move.” Chime went still.

Moon didn’t shift, afraid it would draw the thing’s attention.

Upper air predators often had frighteningly accurate eyesight, good enough to pick out a small loper in tall grass. If this thing was nocturnal, it might hunt by sound, movement, or strange senses unique to itself.

Time stretched, made more painful by the fact that flattened to the metal platform, Moon couldn't see where the thing was. But it must be moving away. The strange scent slowly faded out of the wind.

Finally, Balm called, "It's gone. It went north."

Chime slumped in relief. Moon sat up and took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders to ease the tension. He heard the others moving, a rustle of wings as someone shifted. A head peered down at them from the platform just above, and Chime waved at it to show they were all right. Sounding shaken, he asked, "Did you see what it was?"

"Not a Fell." Balm leaned down from the higher platform to answer him. "The body was long and narrow, like a snake. A big snake."

"Stone didn't say anything about big predators," Jade's voice came from above, more thoughtful than worried. "Maybe it's only here during the warm season."

Moon tugged on Chime's tail, which at some point had wrapped firmly around his waist. "Could you...?"

Chime twitched in embarrassment. "Oh." He let go of Moon and shifted back to groundling. "Sorry."

Moon shrugged off the apology. "You shifted in your sleep. Is that normal?"

"No, not that I know of." Chime looked warily out to sea. "You think I shifted because I felt it out there? Because I'm a mentor?" He lifted his shoulders uncomfortably. "But it was just an animal—albeit a big animal. I don't know why it would cause that reaction, unless there was something magical about it."

Moon nodded. "That's mostly what I was worried about."

"I don't know," Chime said again, sounding testy about it. "I'll have to ask Flower, if we get back alive."

"Get back alive?" Moon echoed, startled. It wasn't a long trip, and Stone hadn't indicated that it was a dangerous one. Granted, Stone had different standards for danger, but still. He took a wild guess. "How many times before this have you left the colony?"

Chime's glare was palpable even in the dark. He lowered his voice and glanced warily at the upper platforms. "All right, yes, this is the

first night I've ever spent away." He shrugged uneasily. "I didn't realize it would be this..."

"Dark?" Moon suggested.

The sound of gritted teeth was obvious. "That's not funny."

Moon heard the others settling down again. Song took Balm's place as guard. There wasn't anything Moon could say to Chime that wouldn't be either pointless or patronizing. He just said, "Don't put your tail on me," and lay back down, pillowing his head on his arm. After some fidgeting and hesitation, Chime curled up behind him again.

The rest of the night was uneventful.

They reached the Golden Isles the next afternoon.

Moon saw the crops first: forests of short, ferny trees rising up out of the sea bottom, and beds of floating moss, planted with bushy root vegetables. Further in toward the islands, groundlings in small reed boats paddled swiftly between the thick clumps of foliage, tending it with long rods. They wore big, conical straw hats, and at first didn't see the Raksura flying over them. Then Moon heard a thin shout distorted by the wind, and all the straw hats tipped upward. They seemed to be small people, their skin a honey-gold, their hair light-colored.

Just beyond the floating fields, the flying islands hovered high above the sea. Most were fairly large, though smaller chunks drifted in their wake. Some were high in the air, but others were only twenty or thirty paces above the water. They were all covered with conical towers and domed structures made of a white clay and roofed with reeds, connected by bridges and long galleries.

The flying boats were everywhere, docked at round wooden platforms stuck out into the air from the edges of the islands. They looked like ocean-going sailing ships, except the hulls were slimmer, less substantial, made of light lacquered wood or reeds. They were all sizes, from tiny rafts that could only hold a few people to double-hulled cargo craft more than three hundred paces long. Most had one or two masts, but they must be there for some reason other than sails, since there were no spars to support them.

Below the lowest island, floating on the water's surface, was a large wooden platform built as a docking place for conventional sea-going craft. It was connected to the island above it by long wooden stairways. Two big flat cargo barges were moored at it, and a group of Islanders, in the midst of unloading clay jars from a third barge,

pointed and stared and called out to one another.

Stone had said that they should land on the lowest platform, as it was the formal entrance to the city. Jade led the way as they glided down toward it, and Moon landed on the battered boards with the others.

The Islanders stared and scrambled around the stacks of clay pots and baskets to get a better view, or rushed to the railings of the nearby cargo barge. They seemed avid with curiosity and confusion, but not much afraid. They were short, the tops of their heads barely reaching Moon's shoulder, most dressed for work in little but brief wraps around their waists. Most of them wore the straw hats. This close, he could see they had golden skin and golden eyes, and their hair was white, silky as floss.

More Islanders clattered down the steps from the upper island. This group seemed more intent, as if they meant to officially greet or repel strangers. They wore short robes, belted at the waist, and some wore lacquered armor pieces that protected chest and back. Their weapons were staves made of reeds wrapped together and lacquered hard. Still, Moon had the impression they didn't encounter much serious fighting, and probably spent more time breaking up brawls on the docks.

The armed group reached the platform and approached cautiously. At some signal from Jade, the warriors shifted to groundling. Their audience exclaimed in astonishment.

After a moment of indecision, Moon shifted, too. He stood on the platform under that startled gaze, the sun warm on his skin, the strong wind off the water pulling at his hair and clothes. Every nerve itched; he felt horribly exposed. He had never shifted in front of groundlings unless he was in the midst of a last-ditch escape. This just felt... wrong.

The leader of the Islanders stepped forward, her expression wary. Her age was hard to tell; the fine lines at her eyes and mouth could easily have been from the sun and the omnipresent glare off the water. She spread her hands, saying, "I greet you on behalf of the Golden Isles... in peace?" She spoke Altanic, which was a relief to Moon.

Jade copied her gesture. "I am Jade, of the Indigo Cloud Court, sent by our line-grandfather, Stone. We seek to treat with you, to discuss a trade."

"Oh, good." The woman's relief was obvious. "I'm Endell-liani, the overseer of cargo and trade. Will you come with me to talk with our Gerent? He is the elected leader of our trade guilds and speaker

for our people.”

Jade inclined her head, the breeze making her spines flutter. “We would be honored.”

They followed her up the steps to the first island. The stair, supported by stone pillars with heavy wooden beams as cross-braces, was broad and steady. Alongside it, sharing the stone supports, was a pulley system for lifting small loads of cargo. Moon supposed large loads just went up in a flying boat.

As they climbed, Moon braced himself against the new array of curious stares from the Islanders on the next level; maybe it would be better when they went inside, where he wouldn’t feel so exposed. He thought he wasn’t betraying his nerves, but Jade kept glancing back at him with an air of suspicion, as if she thought he was doing something embarrassing.

Then Root, climbing the steps behind Moon, grumbled, “Why do we have to walk? Why can’t we fly?”

Or maybe Jade had been looking past Moon at Root, waiting for him to do something embarrassing. At least he had spoken the Raksuran tongue and not the trade Altanic the Islanders were using. Further down the steps, Song hissed at him and said, “Because it would be rude to the groundlings.”

Root laughed. “They don’t care. They want to see us fly. They stare like—”

Moon’s last nerve snapped. He stopped and turned abruptly back to Root. “I care.”

Root bristled, but Moon stood a step or two above him, looking down—a dominant position. Root gave in, twitching his shoulders in an unconscious attempt to lower the spines he didn’t have in his groundling form. He muttered, “Sorry.” Song emphasized the rebuke by slapping him in the back of the head.

Moon turned back, avoided Jade’s gaze, and kept climbing.

They reached the first island, where the stairs gave way to a paved plaza surrounded by white clay towers. Market stalls built of reeds or shaded with bright cloth canopies opened onto it. Most of the people gathered around the stalls were Islanders, though a few groundlings were of obviously different races, maybe traders from the barges. Moon smelled fish frying in sweet spices, and hoped the Islanders’ idea of hospitality included offering food.

Then Song said, “Jade, what’s that?”

Moon turned to look. Song pointed to the sky, squinting to see past the glare. Moon found the object immediately, a light-colored shape against the clouds. At this distance, it had to be something large. Very large.

Their Islander escort stopped and watched them uneasily. All the other Raksura had gone still, staring up at the sky. Peering up as well, Endell-liani said, "What is it?"

"There's something up there, heading this way," Jade answered.

It had a long snake-like body, white or pale yellow, and blended into the clouds it had dropped out of. The wings were huge, rounded like a water-skating insect's, translucent in the sunlight. As light acrid scent tainted the air. Moon said, "Balm, this is what you saw last night?"

She glanced uneasily at him. "It's the same shape, same scent."

It drew closer and closer, past the point where Moon hoped they were all mistaken and that it wasn't heading toward the islands and would turn away. It grew larger and more distinct, causing a bewildered stir among the watching Islanders. The hum of its wings was audible now, and growing louder.

"I see it now. It's a cloud-walker." Endell-liani waved a hand, baffled. "But they're harmless. They live very high in the air, and come down only to feed on a certain plant that lies across the surface, much further out to sea. They don't even bother our ships."

That explained why Stone hadn't warned them about it. A plant-eating upper air skyling wasn't much of a threat. Except this one headed down, straight toward the Islanders' harbor.

"It doesn't look harmless," Chime said, his voice low. "It looks like it's coming down here for a reason."

Moon had to agree. The creature plunged toward the harbor area just below this island, still not veering from its course. Sentries on the upper island shouted alarms; on the lower docks, Islanders backed away, scattered up the stairs and ladders onto the first island. Little skiffs in the water paddled rapidly away in all directions. One of the trade barges tried to cast off, though it was pitifully slow.

"This is so strange." Endell-liani shook her head in horrified disbelief. "Perhaps it's injured, ill, and it's —"

The cloud-walker's plunge turned into a spiral, its translucent wings a blur of movement. The head was big and round, the crystalline eyes multi-faceted; Moon couldn't tell if it was focused on the harbor or the small floating island to one side of it. A cluster of

flying boats hung off a platform on the island. The wind from the creature's wings caused them to rock and clatter against each other.

For a moment it seemed as if the cloud-walker would do nothing, its shadow falling over the barges and docks while the Islanders froze in horror. Then the long, heavy length of its tail whipped around and struck the nearest cluster of flying boats. Moon flinched back as the hulls shattered. The platform broke in half, crashing down into a water-barge below. Wood cracked and groundlings screamed as the barge's big mast shattered.

Endell-liani turned and ran for the end of the plaza, shouting, "Harbormen, assemble!"

The cloud-walker writhed in the air, as if the contact had been as painful for it as it was for the boats, the barge, and crew. It pushed upward, circling the upper island, knocking the roof off a tower with one casual blow of a foreleg.

"This can't be a coincidence," Chime said, turning urgently to Jade. "It's here for us."

He had to be right. Unless this giant plant-eater had suddenly developed a taste for groundlings, this attack was aimed at the Raksura. And the Islanders, their ships, the helpless groundlings on the trade barges, were going to take the brunt of it. Moon looked at Jade and demanded, "Are you just going to let this happen?"

She turned to him, her spines flaring out in anger. She said, "Then stop it."

It was equal parts challenge and order.

Moon shifted and leapt into the air, hard beats of his wings taking him up. He needed to get above the thing as it swung around to take another dive.

It came around the top of the highest island and, instead of diving again, it veered off.

It's heading for—Moon snapped his wings shut and dropped, the skyling's swipe missing him by a bare wingspan.

Moon spread his wings again, catching himself on the wind as the cloud-walker overshot him. This is a problem, he thought, twisting in midair to follow its progress. He had expected it to ignore him in favor of the flying boats or the running Islanders. But if he couldn't get on top of it, at least he could keep it moving, maybe tire it out.

It circled again and headed back for him, and he saw that it didn't have claws. Its hands had stick-like fingers covered with flat pads,

each capable of easily squeezing Moon to pieces. He banked and flew away from the islands, leading it out over the open sea.

It was fast, too fast. Moon was barely past the outer edge of the moored barges before its shadow fell over him. He dove, down and to the side. The displaced air as it rushed past him nearly sent him tumbling.

It circled again. Moon had no idea how he could keep this up much longer.

Then he caught movement from the corner of his eye. Root and Song were in the air, arrowing straight in toward the thing. He looked for the others and saw Jade, Chime, Balm, and Branch high overhead, angling to try to hit it from above.

The cloud-walker spotted Root and Song, and veered toward them. Moon drove himself upward, hard and high, reaching the others just in time to join their dive for the cloud-walker's head.

From this angle Moon could see how the long snake-like body was articulated; he aimed for the joint just below the round head, hoping for a soft spot.

He struck the body, found the rim of the shell, and sunk his claws into the tough gray hide just under it, furling his wings to keep from being blown off. Jade slammed down just past him and hooked her claws over the edge of the shell. The others hit further up or down. The cloud-walker abruptly bucked, its body contracting hard enough to knock Moon's feet loose. For an instant he was almost standing on his head. Exerting every ounce of his strength, he dragged himself down and landed again. Jade still held on, her spines flat with the effort, but the others were gone.

Moon didn't have time to worry about whether they were still alive. He looked down the cloud-walker's back to get his bearings, then did a double-take. That can't be right.

Midway down the length of the creature's body was a huge, discolored lump of flesh, a growth as big as a small hut. It glistened unpleasantly in the light, so mottled it was hard to tell if had once been the same color as the cloud-walker's hide or not. Maybe we're wrong. Maybe it's not Fell-sent. Maybe the creature had just been maddened by illness.

Moon slapped Jade with his tail to get her attention. Jade tried to hit him back with her own tail, missed, then finally twitched around to look. She stared at the horrible thing, then turned to Moon. Instead of disgust, her expression held startled comprehension. She leaned

over to shout in Moon's ear, "Fell, in there!"

"What?" Moon shouted back. He looked at the tumor again. Fell were capable of some strange things, but this... "How can—Are you sure?"

Jade glared, and made a series of incomprehensible gestures with her free hand. She seemed sure.

The cloud-walker swung around to begin another dive, and there was no more time to discuss it. Moon motioned for Jade to stay back, and climbed toward the mass, hooking his claws around the edges of the cloud-walker's chitinous plates to haul himself along.

Drawing closer, he thought he saw a dark shape inside the semi-translucent growth. Holding on to a plate with one hand, he poked the tumor cautiously. The texture was softer than he had expected, almost rubbery. He was glad the pads on his scaled hands weren't very sensitive; he would have hated to touch this thing with his groundling skin. Moon braced himself and swiped his claws across the mass.

The surface split, but the cloud-walker didn't react. The big body tipped down, diving toward another target. Moon clawed and tore at the mass. It split further, releasing an acrid stench he could scent even in this harsh wind. It abruptly collapsed, revealing the dark shape that lay inside. Moon stared in shock. Jade was right. Hidden inside the growth was a Fell ruler.

Unconscious, cradled in what was left of the tumor, it looked even more like a Raksura—a consort—than the minor dakti. Like them, it had webbed, leathery wings, but its dark scales were smoother, its face less animal and more Raksuran. Instead of spines, it had a rigid bone crest fanning out from its head. Moon surged forward. He had to kill this thing, now, before—

Its eyes snapped open, dark with feral rage. It leapt at him.

It hit Moon and bowled him backwards. He lost his grip on the cloud-walker's plate and tumbled right off its back with the ruler on top of him. Moon caught its wrists, keeping its claws away from his throat, and jammed one foot against its stomach to hold it off. It whipped its tail around and caught him across the back, the sharp barb barely deflected by his spines. It laughed in his face, knowing if Moon let go, it would have him. The only safe way to kill a ruler was to catch it while it was asleep or drop on it from behind, and Moon had missed those chances.

Past the edge of the ruler's spread wings, Moon saw movement, a flash of blue and gray Raksuran scales. I hope that means what I think

it means. He snarled at the ruler, wrenched free, and fell away.

It howled with amusement and angled its wings to dive at him. Just as Jade hit it from behind.

There was a confused flurry of wings and tails, a spray of black Fell blood. The stench of the blood went straight to Moon's head; he lost all caution and flapped to get up to them to re-join the fight.

Something slammed into his back, a wing beat hard enough to stun him. Moon plummeted, unable to catch himself. A heartbeat later he slammed into water, the force of his fall sending him straight down to strike the shallow, sandy bottom. The impact knocked the air out of his lungs and he flailed for the surface. But his claws caught in a soft mesh, like a net threaded with layers of filmy cloth. Not cloth, moss and water plants. He had hit the water in one of the Islanders' floating fields.

He tore at the strands wrapping his arms, trying to rip the soft fibers away and fight to the surface. While the moss shredded easily, the net itself wouldn't tear.

Moon thrashed toward the surface. The stuff wrapped around his wings, his tail, as if it were alive; the weight dragged him down. Don't panic, he thought, his heart pounding frantically. He couldn't go up so he tried to go down, struggling to get below the net so he could swim out from under it. He scraped the bottom, sand and shells scratching against his scales, but the whole mass moved down with him, twisting around him. He hadn't had a chance to take a deep breath before he went under. His lungs burned as he ripped at the net, fighting the drag of his own trapped wings. He knew he had only one choice left: he shifted.

Much of the weight dragging at him vanished but water flooded his lungs. The net still wrapped his body. Blind, choking, he tore upward but the moss and netting closed over him, blocking his way to the surface. He thought, You should have taken the knife. Happy now?

Then everything went dark and drifting.

The next thing he knew, someone pounded him on the back. Moon choked and coughed until he got a ragged breath of air.

An arm around his chest held him up just above the moss-clotted water, an arm with scales. In instinctive reflex he tried to shift again, but nothing happened. He thought woozily, That's either very bad or —He let his head drop back and saw the person holding him was Jade.

She hung off the side of a big flying boat, clinging with one hand

to a rope. Above her, Chime gripped the side of the boat with his claws, one hand wrapped around Jade's wrist to keep her from falling. An Islander woman suspended beside them wore a roped harness that let her hang nearly head-down in the water. She sawed at the net with a long blade. Moon didn't know if Jade had really killed the Fell, if the others had survived the fight. "Where—" It came out in a barely audible rasp.

"Hold still," Jade said, her voice gritty with the effort of holding up his grounling form plus the water-logged weight of the net and the moss. He wanted to tell her to let go. The only thing supporting her was Chime's grip on the boat; if she fell, they would both be trapped in the net.

The weight dropped away abruptly, and Jade gasped in relief. The Islander woman leaned back in the harness, shouting, "He's free! Pull, pull!"

Chime hauled at Jade, and Jade dragged Moon up. He held on, watching the water and the sinking tangle of net and moss recede, until Jade pulled him over a wooden railing.

Moon grabbed it and hung on, determined not to collapse. Several Islanders retreated to the central mast, where they hauled on the ropes attached to it. The sails unfolded from the sides of the mast in a light wooden framework, extending out like giant fans.

The deck swayed under Moon, and he thought his head was swimming. Then he realized the boat was lifting up from the water, heeling over as it rose in the air and turned back toward the city. "Did you kill the Fell?" he croaked.

"It's in pieces," Chime told him, jittery with relief. "The others are looking for its head. The cloud-walker just flew away, as fast as it could."

Jade added, "The Fell was controlling it." She turned abruptly to the Islander woman, who was being helped out of her harness by two sailors. "Anything you want, anything in our power to give, just ask."

The woman was startled, looking from Jade to Moon. "It isn't necessary. You drove the cloud-walker away."

"It is necessary," Chime hissed in Raksuran, and turned half away to look out over the sea. "That Fell was after us. It caught the cloud-walker last night, and followed us. Once it realized we must be here for the boats—"

"Yes, it followed us." Jade turned back to him, her voice a low growl. "Pearl didn't send it here."

Moon wanted to argue, but just held on to the railing. A Fell ruler hadn't decided to follow them on an off chance; it had known they had an important task, even if it wasn't certain just what the task was. And someone had told it.

Chapter Eight

The flying boat took them up to the highest island, to a building of sun-warmed clay and reed-thatched roofs, made up of dozens of slim towers, balconies, and domed turrets. Moon was too sick to investigate how the boat worked, or enjoy the novel sensation of flying in comfort with something else to do all the work. The craft swung close to the turrets and dropped a gangplank.

Moon followed Chime and Jade as Endell-liani led them down onto the wide circle of the tower's docking platform. The fresh wind was the only thing keeping him on his feet. Endell-liani told Jade, "This is the palace of the Gerent and the trading guilds. The rooms in this tower are for your use. You are our honored guests."

As Jade thanked her, Balm, Branch, Root, and Song arrived in a noisy rush, landing on the platform with a clatter of claws against wood. Jade hissed them quiet and spoke to them in Altanic, so Endell-liani could follow the conversation. "Was that the only one?"

Balm shifted to groundling, the others following belatedly. "There was nothing else as far as we could see," she said, breathless. "The cloud-walker is still heading out to sea, so fast we couldn't catch up to it."

"The cloud-walker was just a prisoner," Jade told her. "The Fell had made a sac on its back, and a ruler was inside. He must have taken control of the cloudwalker's mind somehow."

Chime twitched uneasily. "I know the kethel grow sacs like that so they can carry dakti more easily. I didn't know rulers would get inside one."

"They're getting inventive." Jade's spines relaxed as the tension went out of her shoulders. "Hopefully they only caught one cloud-walker."

"One would have been enough," Chime pointed out. "It could have destroyed this place."

Branch held up the ruler's head. The jaws hung open, and one eye was torn out. "What should we do with this?"

Moon tried to croak out an answer, but Jade turned to Endell-liani, asking her, "Do you know about the Fell rulers? The head has to

be—”

“Yes, we know.” Endell-liani turned back to the flying ship and waved imperatively at someone onboard. “It should be placed in a cask of salt and buried on land.”

Moon didn’t need to hear anymore; the cask of salt wasn’t necessary, but the head did need to be concealed under a layer of earth, otherwise it would draw more rulers.

The wooden door into the tower stood open, and he went inside. A short passage led to a big round room with high windows that let in light and air, the walls and floor rubbed smooth with white clay. He staggered through the first inner doorway, then the second, until he found a room with big water jars and tile basins and drains. He dropped to his knees beside a basin and retched into it.

“Are you all right?” Chime asked from a safe distance behind him. “We didn’t see where you fell at first, and we kept expecting you to come back up.”

“Thanks,” Moon managed to croak. Aside from having half the Yellow Sea and all its plant life in his stomach, he was fine.

When he finished, he felt hollowed out, and it hurt to take a deep breath. His clothes dripped and he still had strands of moss wrapped around him. He had no idea where his pack had ended up.

He wandered out the nearest door and found a small, open court, its smooth white clay reflecting the sun. Most groundlings would have found it too hot for comfort; it was probably meant more to allow light and air into the windows and doorways of the rooms around it. A few chairs of light, delicately carved, ivory-colored wood were scattered about, along with a couch draped with gauzy white fabric. Moon peeled his wet shirt off and collapsed on the couch, stretching out face down and pillowing his head on his arms. It was Islander-sized and too short for him, his feet hanging off the end, but it was far more comfortable than the floor.

He heard Jade and Chime come out into the court. One of them, he wasn’t sure which, brushed the hair off his temple, then laid a cool hand on his back to feel his breathing. He made an “umph” noise to show he was still alive. Chime said, “Better to let him sleep.”

They left. Moon lay there and listened to the others talk and move in and out of the court and the rooms around it. The baking sun lulled him into a half-drowse.

Sometime later he heard unfamiliar footsteps and smelled groundling tinged with salt and sun and sweet oil, the scent he was

learning to associate with the Islanders. He turned his head, squinting. The sun had moved enough for shade to fall across half the court, and an old Islander man stood in it, watching Moon. His hair, beard, and mustache were as silky white as gossamer, a startling contrast against his weathered gold skin. He held a large book with wooden covers.

“I wanted to show you something,” he said, as if this were the middle of a conversation they had been having. He stepped closer and crouched down to set the book on the paving. He flipped it open and paged through it. Moon pushed himself up a little more and leaned over to see. He had slept long enough for his clothes to dry, for the sun to bake most of the sickness out of him.

The paper was white, some kind of pounded reed, and it was filled with squiggly writing in different hands and inks, in a language with curving characters that Moon couldn’t read. The old man found the page he wanted and turned the book so Moon could see.

It was a sketch, an Aeriati in his shifted form, wings and spines flared. Scribbled notes trailed down the page. The old man tapped it. “This is correct? This is a young consort, like you?”

Moon touched the page. The sketch didn’t indicate what color the scales were, unless it was in the notes. But he thought the spines went further down the back than a warrior’s, that the wings were proportionally larger.

“If—” His voice came out as a croak and he had to clear his throat. “— the scales are black, yes.” His throat was dry and sore. He would have to go in search of water soon, but he didn’t want to drag himself up yet.

“I’ve seen the old consort who came here, but only from a distance. He spoke only to some traders and the Gerent.” He opened a wooden case that hung at his belt and took out some loose sheets of paper and a writing instrument that appeared to be a charcoal stick in an ivory holder. He peered closely at Moon; his golden eyes were a little filmy. “Always black?”

“I think so.” It occurred to Moon that he really should know these things. He turned the page, where he found a sketch of a male warrior balanced on the piling of a pier.

The man smoothed the paper on the clay floor. “You don’t grow a beard?”

“Lots of groundling races don’t,” Moon said, before he remembered he didn’t have to justify it. These people already knew he was different. Nobody was going to ask those questions that had once

been impossible to answer, like, What are your people called? and Where do you come from? The old man grunted thoughtfully and scribbled a note.

Chime walked into the court. He stood next to the couch, directing a puzzled frown down at the old man. In Raksuran, he said, "Their leader is here, talking to Jade."

"He came here?" That was a little surprising. Moon had assumed the negotiation would take place in some council room somewhere in the palace below them. Maybe it was a good sign.

"They're being polite." Chime stepped sideways, angling his head, trying to read over the old man's shoulder. "They knew Jade didn't want to leave you."

That was more surprising. "Me? Why?"

Chime's expression suggested that the question could be more idiotic, but he wasn't sure how. "You're her consort. Everyone realizes that but you."

Not having spines that he could flare threateningly at Chime at the moment, Moon settled for ignoring him. He leaned over the book again and turned more pages. Towards the back was a drawing of Stone in his shifted form, but it was from a distance, with the roof of a tower to give perspective. That was the last drawing, and Moon turned back to the front, finding older sketches of female warriors and Arbora. He paused at a more detailed drawing of a queen curled up on a broad windowsill, so unexpectedly sensual it made him blink. He switched back to Altanic to ask the old man, "Is this whole book about Raksura?"

"Yes. It goes back several generations, copied from older documents." The old man turned the pages back to the beginning, where the ink was a little faded. "It begins with the first sighting of Raksura by an expedition to the interior."

In exasperation, Chime pointed down at the old man. "Who is this?"

"I don't know." Preoccupied, Moon studied the drawing. It was blocky and not as skilled as the later sketches, showing a flying boat with little winged figures around it.

"This wasn't done at the time." The man sniffed disparagingly. "Inaccurate."

Chime sat down and leaned in to look at the scene. "How do you know it's inaccurate?"

“It doesn’t match the account of the starguider Kilen-vanyi-atar, who wrote of meeting the Raksura, and treating with their court.” The man traced his finger over the writing, found a passage, and read, “As our craft sailed over the clearing, we saw an outcrop of stone, and on it, lying full in the fierce sunlight, were eight or so people. My first fear was that they were dead, but they lay more in the attitude of sleep, and showed no wounds. Their clothing was as bright as the plumage of birds.” He looked up. “He goes on to say that they woke as the ship drew closer, transformed, and flew swiftly away. It took some time for him to convince one to speak to him, let alone to come near his ship.”

Moon thought that if the boat could get so close without waking them, then the whole group was lucky not to have been eaten by something before the Islanders happened along. “They were probably humiliated at being caught in the open.”

Chime turned his head to study the drawing, saying absently, “They sound almost as twitchy as you.”

Moon thought Chime needed to visit a lake bottom again, and made a mental note to arrange that as soon as possible.

The old man squinted at Chime. “You are a warrior?”

“No,” Chime said. Moon cocked an eyebrow at him, and Chime gave him a thin-lipped glare. “Well, yes,” Chime told the old man grudgingly.

“There are differences between you?”

“He’s moody,” Chime offered, leaning over to frown at the writing. “More than anyone I know, actually.”

Trying to page to the back of the book to see if there were any more drawings of queens, Moon snorted derisively. “Meeting the people you know would make anybody moody.” Then he heard voices from the other room, and a small commotion of footsteps. He rolled onto his side in time to see Jade, Balm, Endell-liani, and several other Islanders come through the nearest doorway. A young Islander man pushed past Endell-liani to burst into the court, only to stop abruptly. He stared at Moon’s old man, and said, nonplussed, “Grandfather.”

“I’m busy,” Grandfather said, still writing.

Endell-liani gave the young man a look of marked disapproval. “Niran, I told you everything would be well.”

The other Islanders stood there awkwardly. Moon picked out the one that must be the leader: an older man, polished stone beads braided into his straight white hair, wearing a robe dyed a rich blue.

The leader turned to Jade and said, “My apologies for Niran’s impulsiveness.”

Niran looked uncertain, but not particularly guilty. It was obvious that Grandfather had heard there was a consort here and slipped away from the Gerent’s party in search of him. Apparently, finding him missing, Niran had come to the conclusion that he had been eaten.

Jade’s expression was ironic. “There is no need for you to apologize.”

It was a deliberate hint. Niran must have been less than tactful in his search, and Jade couldn’t let the insult go by. Moon approved; he was a rank amateur at Raksuran relations with groundlings, but it had to be made clear that the implication that any of them would even consider hurting a harmless elder was a serious insult. Everybody looked expectantly at Niran, who said, stiffly, “I apologize.”

The Gerent gave him a long look, then turned back to Jade. He inclined his head to her. “You are gracious. Please, let us continue our talk.”

Jade resettled her wings and led the way back inside. The Islanders followed her, with only Niran and Endell-liani remaining. Niran hesitated, saying, “Grandfather, you should leave them alone.”

Grandfather fixed a sharp gaze on Moon. “Do you want to be left alone?”

“No,” Moon said, too caught by surprise to lie. The question had more weight than Grandfather realized.

The sharp gaze was transferred to Niran. “Now go home. I’ll come when I’m finished here.”

Niran lingered, frustrated, but Endell-liani took his arm, tugging him away, and finally he went with her. Chime watched them go, frowning. “That’s not a good sign.”

Moon shrugged. Niran had a right to be cautious, but this would teach him to be subtle about it next time. Moon asked Grandfather, “Will you read this book to us?”

“Yes.” Grandfather tugged it away from Chime. “I will read you Kilen-vanyiatar’s observations.”

With the negotiations going on in the inner room, they settled in for a long wait. When Moon tried to drag himself up to go in search of water, Chime refused to let him. Chime found Root in the next room and sent him to get water and tea, then sent him back after that for cushions and a chair for Grandfather, whose name turned out to be

Delin-Evran-lindel. Apparently the more names you had, the higher your rank, and Delin was an important scholar.

The book was fascinating. It told the history of all the interactions the Islanders had ever had with Raksura, and legends about them collected from other races. “This scholar actually spoke to the Ghobin?” Chime asked at one point, incredulous and impressed. “How? And more importantly, why?”

“Venar-Inram-Alil was a very determined man,” Delin admitted. “Also something of an ass.”

“Did they kill him?” Moon asked. He had never seen the Ghobin before, but they were a persistent threat in the forested hills much further inland. They lived underground, tunneling under other species’ dwellings to attack them, or stealing their young as food.

Delin turned the page with decision. “Eventually.”

Some of the information collected in the book was wrong, which Chime pointed out immediately. Delin made careful corrections. There were also myths and fragments of the Islanders’ own lore, stories about where their flying islands had come from and how they had been made. Moon found it all interesting. Balm stayed with Jade, but Branch and Song drifted in to listen, with Root wandering in and out, pretending to be bored.

After the request for tea, the Islanders sent in food, and after a while Moon felt like eating again. They provided fish, roasted whole or baked in clay pots with spices, yellow squash-like things that grew in the water-garden plots below the islands, and raw yellow clams and shellfish from the sea bottom. The others balked at the cooked fish, which just left more for Moon. The Islanders sent wine as well, but Moon preferred the delicate green and yellow teas. Fermented or distilled liquids had never had much effect on him, and it was interesting to see it was the same with the other Raksura.

Late in the afternoon, Delin found a story in the book that said Raksura could be captured by a ring of jien powder. Since there happened to be some available in the palace larder, Chime insisted they make the experiment. Moon thought it unlikely; jien was a popular spice in the east, and since it was often sprinkled on top of pastries and dumplings, he had gotten it on himself on many occasions. It had never had any ill effect on him, if he didn’t count sneezing, but saying so would have ruined the fun. The others picked Root to experiment on, but apparently convinced this was a trick, he

retreated to sulk in a doorway. They finally tried it on Song, who stepped in and out of the circle of spice with no difficulty, saying, "I think we're doing it wrong."

Branch and Root got a little rowdy afterward, teasing that threatened to escalate into a fight. After the Niran incident, two young warriors in a loud and violent play-fight would be the last thing Jade needed. Moon said, "Branch. Root," and then stared at them, communicating that if he had to get up off his couch, someone was going to get hurt.

They both subsided; Branch looked guilty.

Moon remembered thinking that Branch might be trouble, and knew he had been wrong. Branch was good-natured and quiet. Root was loud and annoying because he was young. Song was sweet and fierce, and shoved both bigger males around like a miniature queen.

Moon reminded himself that this was just a temporary place for him. If he wanted to stay with Indigo Cloud, he would have to keep defying Pearl, and sooner or later that would throw the whole court into chaos. From what he could tell, the court couldn't stand any more chaos. But it was seductive, this easy comradeship. It might be easy, but it wasn't uncomplicated.

The day wore on toward evening, and the shadows grew deep enough that Chime went to light the bronze oil lamps that hung around the court. Not long after that, Moon had to tell the others that groundlings didn't get stronger as they got older, and that Delin needed rest. Delin claimed that he was well able to continue as long as they wanted, then fell asleep in his chair.

Chime sat at Delin's feet, paging through the book, while the others talked or curled up to nap. Moon just enjoyed the quiet.

Then Song said, "Moon, is it true you don't know what court you came from? That you were alone until Stone found you?"

Moon lay on his back, watching the sky turn orange and violet with sunset. "I wasn't alone. I lived with groundlings, off and on."

Root stirred. "What was that like?"

Moon hesitated. He had no idea what to say. When I was too small to live in the forest without getting eaten, I went to a groundling town. It was terrifying. Or I had to teach myself their languages. I picked through garbage for food. I didn't know how to fit in, what to do. That wasn't the whole truth, though. I loved living with the Hassi, but the Fell came. I had friends, but I always had to leave them, before anyone found out.

Branch snorted, and from the sound, gave Root a shove to the head. "Idiot. Can you think of a harder question?"

"What?" Root demanded.

"What's the wind like?" Chime said dryly.

"You mean, right now, or—" Root subsided, disgruntled. "All right, all right, I see."

Balm walked into the court. One look at her expression, discouraged and angry, told Moon all he needed to know even before she spoke. "They said no." She sat down on a chair, burying her face in her hands.

Chime stared. "What, just like that?"

"No, not just like that. That's what we've been arguing about all day." Balm rubbed her eyes. "If they do it, they think the Fell would take more cloud-walkers captive and send them out here. Or the boats will be destroyed along the way, when the Fell attack us."

They could still move the court, but flying in stages or going on foot would take longer and leave them open to more Fell attacks. Moon hadn't realized until this moment just how much he had counted on this trip being successful.

"What are we going to do?" Root asked uneasily.

"Go back," Branch said. He sighed. "Think of something else. Or do it the hard way."

Song got up, took Balm's wrist and tugged her to her feet. "Come and get something to eat."

Branch and Root trailed after her. Chime and Moon sat there for a moment in silence. Then Chime stood. Sounding resigned, he said, "I'm going in to light the lamps. I can't think when it's dark."

Moon nodded. As Chime went inside, Moon got up to look for his shirt and found that someone had rinsed out the saltwater and moss and left it draped over a chair to dry. He pulled it on and went back to sit on the couch, depressed. He had counted on this working, counted on the court being able to move relatively quickly, so he would be free to leave them and the Fell and his own confusion behind.

A blue Arbora walked into the court. Moon stared, then realized it was Jade. This was the first time he had seen her other form. She was still tall and slim, and her scales had the same blue and gray pattern, but they looked softer, closer to groundling skin than Raksuran hide, though that might have been a trick of the shadow. Her wings were gone and her mane was smaller, not reaching much past her

shoulders, and was more soft frills than spines. She hesitated, then said glumly, “I suppose Balm told you.”

He nodded, uncomfortable. “You did all you could. They still might not have agreed, even without the Fell.”

“I know.” She came over to sit on the end of the couch, adding with rueful sarcasm, “I pointed out that if we hadn’t been here when the Fell attacked, the damage would have been much worse. But I think they saw the flaw in my logic.”

Moon looked away, a wry twist to his mouth. “It’s just a little flaw.” He hesitated, absently rubbed at a spot on the cushion. “I wanted to thank you for pulling me out of the sea.”

He had meant it to be friendly, but Jade’s whole body stiffened. “I would have done it for any member of the court.”

Well, fine, Moon thought. He had been hoping for an actual conversation; he wasn’t even sure why. But he needed to make sure of one more thing. “Did she ask for anything? The Islander woman who helped us.” If Jade hadn’t followed through on that promise, Moon needed to find the woman and make good on it—and hope she didn’t ask for anything complicated so that he could fulfill the obligation before they had to leave.

But Jade said, “She didn’t ask, so I gave her one of the pearls, a small one. Endell-liani said it was enough for her to buy her own garden mats, and a new house for her family. I gave another one to the master of the flying boat, to sell and divide among the crew.”

So that was taken care of. Moon should just shut up now, but he said, “That was generous.”

Jade gave him a look he couldn’t read. “You’re a consort.”

If they were going to have a fight, they might as well get on with it. He said, tightly, “I’m a feral solitary with a bad bloodline.”

“Pearl said that, I didn’t. I—” She seemed to steel herself. “Would be honored to take you as consort, except, apparently, I have no idea how.”

Nonplussed, Moon stared at her. “Uh.”

Jade shook her head in frustration. “I know in theory. I tried the gifts; that’s what all the traditions say to do, but they didn’t say what to do if you didn’t accept them.” She waved her hands helplessly. “Look, even now, look what you’re doing—”

Moon realized he had been unconsciously edging down the couch away from her. “I don’t—” He knew he owed her an explanation, but

it was hard to put his instinctive response into words. “The way I’ve lived, it’s not a good idea to accept gifts. In a strange situation, you don’t know what it’s obligating you to do. Especially anything relating to—” He discarded several different words and finally settled on, “—mating.”

Jade absorbed that in silence. Finally she said, “I know I should have waited. Stone told me that you’d never even heard of Raksura before he found you.” She sighed. “In a strong court, there would be clutches of consorts and sister queens, and we would all have been raised together. I’d know which one I wanted, and if he’d accept me. And I’d know what to do, even if I had to fight the other queens for him. And at least I’d have someone to go to for advice.” She shook her head, exasperated. “I haven’t been able to talk to Pearl about anything, for turns and turns.” With rueful resignation, she added, “Stone said I should just take you, fight it out, and get it over with.”

That was typical. “He gives me lousy advice, too.”

“Stone feels responsible. We lost too many warriors and consorts in the fighting, when the Gathen tried to take our territory, then the Sardis attacked the Sky Copper Court and we went to defend them. The consorts that were left... I was just a child, and Pearl didn’t want them because they had all belonged to Amber, so they went to other courts. Flower said things happened so gradually— sickness and dead clutches, and one thing going wrong after another, and they were so busy worrying about the latest disaster—that no one looked at the whole. Stone had left the court by that point, flying off alone, exploring. He didn’t come back until Rain, Pearl’s last consort, died, and after that, it was too late.” She looked at Moon for a long moment. “I know I haven’t made it sound particularly inviting, but... Do you want to join Indigo Cloud?”

Moon shrugged uneasily, reluctant to speak. But he thought she had been honest with him, and it seemed wrong not to be honest in return. “I don’t think I can fit in.” There were those words again. It would be a good day if he never had to hear or say them again.

“You’d rather live with groundlings?” she asked, then than added quickly, “Not that that’s a bad thing. It’s just... unusual.”

“I want to live where I don’t have to hide.” That was about all the honesty Moon could take for the moment. “And does it matter what I want? Pearl ordered me to leave.”

With an edge to her voice, Jade said, “And you refused.”

“I told Stone I’d stay until after the court moved.” Moon let his breath out.

They could talk about this all night, and it wouldn't change anything. "If I can make it that long. The warriors aren't going to just let me ignore her, and I can't fight all of them."

Jade growled low in her throat. He didn't think it was directed at him, but it sent a weird tingle up his spine.

It also woke Delin, who sat up, blinking uncertainly. He looked around for his book and found it where Chime had left it, tucked under the cushion at his feet.

Glad for the interruption, Moon said, "Sorry we woke you."

Delin cleared his throat. "I wasn't asleep, only resting. Your voices are pleasant to listen to."

Moon hadn't had a chance to observe much about Islander manners, but he already knew Delin was no stickler for formality. Settling for a simple introduction, he said, "Jade, this is Delin-Evraniel."

Delin nodded formally to her. "Was your business with the Gerent successful?"

"Not really." Jade poked at the couch cushion with one claw, looking oddly young.

Moon explained, "They wouldn't agree to trade us the use of the flying boats."

Delin rested the book on his lap. "Why do you need wind-ships when you have wings of your own?"

"We don't all have wings," Moon told him. "We need a way to move the Arbora, before the Fell attack the colony."

Jade stirred, but didn't protest. Moon doubted their purpose here was a secret to anyone; the Fell had made sure of that.

Delin scratched his chin thoughtfully. "The Gerent is not the only one who owns wind-ships."

Jade lifted her head, frowning at him. "He and Endell-liani said that all the ships were controlled by the trading guilds."

"Not all. Only the primary cargo vessels. There are many families who own ships for the purpose of exploration, or trade in small luxury goods." Delin glanced toward the lamplit doorway. "We should speak to my daughter. But it would be better if those in the palace did not see us go."

That was one problem Moon could solve. He said, "We can do that."

It was full dark by then, so after a quick scout around the rooms to find an unobserved window, Moon, Jade, and Delin set out for his home. Chime saw them off with a hissed, "Be careful. And don't drop him." At least he had said it in Raksuran.

Delin's family home was on one of the smaller islands that floated a few hundred paces above the water. Lamplight shone from the windows of towers and lit little courts and gardens. Moon carried Delin and kept his pace to a slow glide, hoping to keep the old man from getting sick. But Delin was well accustomed to travel on flying boats and he seemed to enjoy it. He tapped Moon on the chest, pointing toward a balcony on a large tower on the narrow end of the island. Moon glided down toward it, Jade barely a beat behind him.

Jade had left Balm to guard the entrance to their rooms and to cover their absence. If the Gerent or anyone else asked for Jade, Balm would say that she was with her consort and couldn't be disturbed. If someone asked for Delin, she would say that he and Chime were consulting over Delin's book, and anxious to finish before Delin left for the evening. Everyone else had been ordered to stay out of sight and keep their mouths shut.

The balcony was dimly lit by a lamp inside the room, half-shielded by the white curtains across the doorway. The space was also just wide enough for Moon to land without fouling a wing. He saw why Delin had picked this balcony; it faced out toward the sea, away from any docks or the windows of near neighbors. He managed the landing, then set Delin on his feet and shifted to give Jade room. Jade lit neatly on the railing, folded her wings, and stepped down onto the balcony.

A young woman pulled the curtain aside, then jerked back with a startled yelp.

"Quiet!" Delin hushed her hurriedly. "It's me."

She hesitated uncertainly, staring. "Grandfather?"

Delin waved an imperative hand. "These are my guests. Now go find your mother."

The room just inside the balcony was Delin's study. It was smaller than their rooms in the palace, and the cushions and hangings had faded from the sun. Books and unbound rolls of paper crammed the shelves, as well as trade pottery and carvings from far away in the Three Worlds. Moon recognized figured blackware from Kish, a delicately enameled vase from Cient, polished shells that might be from a sea kingdom. Delin's entire family seemed to be here, the adults sitting on the floor mats to listen to Jade, and the adolescents

and younger children hanging back in the doorways, watching curiously.

Jade sat in front of the balcony door, with Moon a little behind her. It still made him deeply uncomfortable that these people knew what he was; he knew it didn't make sense, it was irrational, but he couldn't help it. It hadn't bothered him with Delin, but then Delin was unusual for a groundling.

Jade explained their request plainly, leaving out only the fact that Pearl might be treating with the Fell. Moon couldn't fault her for omitting it. He wasn't sure how much Jade knew, past vague suspicions, and she seemed reluctant to believe even those. And after hearing it, the Islanders would have to be crazy to agree to this.

As it was, it was hard to tell what they thought of the proposal. Delin's eldest daughter, Elen-danar, was the head of the family, an older woman who bore some resemblance to him in the quick intelligence in her golden eyes. She asked careful questions, and seemed hesitant but willing to listen. Niran, unsurprisingly, was obviously against it.

"You brought them here?" he said, too horrified to dissemble, when Delin led them into the room. The other adults had been obviously embarrassed by his reaction and anxious to make up for it, so Moon thought it might have done them more good than harm.

Elen-danar tapped her fingers on the clay floor, frowning in thought. "With so many aboard, there would be little room for food or water. We usually bring large stores so we don't have to land in dangerous country."

"You wouldn't have to land," Moon put in. He felt he had to say something before anyone decided to interpret his silence as guilt or deception. "The warriors could refill the water containers and bring food to the ships."

"That would let the ships travel much faster," one of the younger men said. "If we don't have to stop at all—"

"We could supply you for the trip back as well," Jade added.

"But what would the Gerent and the trade council say?" Niran said, exasperated. "They've already decided this is too dangerous."

"We are not in the trade council. They don't speak for us," Delin said firmly. There was a murmur of agreement from a few of the others.

Still thoughtful, Elen-danar said, "I think you've told us all we need to know. We'll have to discuss it among ourselves."

Jade inclined her head, accepting the answer. “We will leave your islands tomorrow. If you decide in our favor, send someone to us in the morning.” She opened the fold of leather, spilling out seven of the large pearls. “If you decide against us, send someone to return these.”

As they flew back up to the palace towers, Moon saw activity on the platform docks directly below the structure. A small flying boat, lanterns hanging from its prow and stern, was coming in to dock. A dozen or so Islanders cast lines to haul it in. Occupied as the men were, Moon didn’t think they had been seen, but Jade’s colors did catch the light.

They both landed on the roof above the inner open court. Moon crouched, listening for a moment. The lamps in the court had been put out, though light shone from the doorways, and he heard Chime’s voice, and Song’s. He nodded to Jade, then leapt down onto the court below.

Jade landed beside him and folded her wings, shaking her frills back into place. “What do you think the chances are?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

Moon shifted to groundling. “It was hard to tell.” He thought it depended on who had the most influence in the family, who marshaled the best arguments. Delin was obviously for them, Niran against, but it was impossible to tell about the others. “It could go either way.”

She folded her arms, twitching her spines in frustration. “Stone thinks it’s our only chance. Flower said he never wanted the court to move to this colony in the first place.”

Moon hesitated to ask, but Stone was such an enigma that he couldn’t pass up the chance. “Is that why he left the court for so long? He didn’t like the colony?”

Jade shook her head. “No, he left because his queen died. Her name was Azure. I don’t remember her. It was before I was born.” Her shoulders tensed, and he saw her claws flex against her scales. Not looking at him, she said abruptly, “I know you want to leave the court. I would ask you, that if you do... you would consider leaving me with a clutch.”

Moon went still. It should have been a terrible idea. But the first thing that flashed through his mind was to wonder if he could make it a condition that he keep one of the babies—or two. It would have to be two, to keep each other company. But he couldn’t raise them alone, and the moment of wild hope was abruptly over. He thought, Don’t be stupid. Even if it were possible, raising two fledglings outside a court

would just brand them as solitaires, to live alone or try to beg their way into a colony.

No, it was impossible. His heart sank and he wondered if this was what Sorrow had felt, this need to have companionship so intense it made you willing to do anything. Almost anything. It wasn't a comfortable thought.

But leaving a clutch behind to be raised in Indigo Cloud wasn't a much better prospect. The court would eventually manage to negotiate for more consorts, and Moon's clutch would become less important. If anything happened to Jade, the clutch would be left to Pearl's mercy.

It clarified the situation completely, to realize that he didn't want to father any children unless he could be there to kill anything that threatened them.

He could try to explain that to Jade, but after what had happened the last time he had refused a request for a baby... "I'll think about it," he finished, and knew he sounded guilty.

"No, you don't have to answer—" Jade began, then abruptly cut herself off.

There was a new voice from inside. Listening hard, Moon realized it was Endell-liani. That's not a coincidence. He whispered, "They saw us."

Jade hissed in annoyance. "Let's hope they saw us on the way back." She caught his wrist and pulled him along, across the court and through the doorway.

All the others were there: Balm and Chime stood in the inner doorway with Endell-liani as if they had just stepped in, Song and Branch sat on the floor cushions, Root was in his Raksuran form, hanging from the ceiling. He saw them, dropped to the floor, and shifted back to groundling; he left huge gouges in the clay ceiling.

Endell-liani didn't look startled to see them. She said, "I'm sorry to disturb you. The sentry on the docking platform thought he saw something in the air, and I wanted to make certain it was one of you."

"Yes, we, ah, felt the urge to fly." Jade smiled, careful not to show her teeth. "We're newly mated."

Moon didn't have to fake looking flustered. He tugged his wrist free and went over to sit on a bench. Jade's remark had been calculated to cut off any further request for explanation. With some groundling races the ploy wouldn't have worked but, for the Islanders, it was evidently perfect. Endell-liani apologized again, already

backing out of the room. Balm threw a startled look at Jade, and then followed Endell-liani out.

The others were quiet, and Moon realized they were staring at him. Chime craned his neck, making sure Endell-liani was out of earshot. Then he turned hopefully to Moon. "Did you really?"

Jade flared her spines, and Moon fled the room.

Moon climbed out a window and went up to sit on the roof. He watched the clouds travel across the night sky and the endless motion of the sea. The wind was turning cool, and the reed roof didn't hold the day's heat. When he heard the others settling down to sleep, he gave in to impulse and climbed back down the wall to go inside.

They had put all the lamps out, but he could see only one sleeping body in the room off the court, in a nest made up of floor cushions. Moon heard the others, and thought it was Branch on guard in the passage to the dock platform, while everyone else was in the next room.

Chime sat up and said, "Here."

Moon hesitated. Chime should be with the other warriors and Moon shouldn't be encouraging him to separate himself like this. Then he thought, Forget it. He didn't know where he was going when he left Indigo Cloud and he wasn't going to give up even one night of comfort and company. He shifted to groundling as Chime moved over.

As Moon stretched out on the cushions, Chime whispered, "Sorry about earlier. I realize I shouldn't have said that."

Moon settled on his side, wriggling to find a spot for his hipbone. "It's all right."

"I just... We've all been hoping—"

Moon set his jaw, exasperated. "You don't have to hope. Once the court moves you can get a consort from Star Aster."

Chime whispered harshly, "I don't want a stuck-up consort from Star Aster acting as if he's condescending to do us a huge favor. I want you."

Moon rolled over and sat up. He leaned over Chime and hissed, "You're not going to get me."

Chime hadn't been raised to be a warrior and didn't give way as easily as Root and Branch. He shrank back a little in token submission, but immediately demanded, "Why not?"

With an annoyed growl, Moon gave up and lay back down. The

others might not be able to hear what they were talking about, but everyone might wonder why they were snarling at each other. “Stone never thought this would work. He just needed a consort so the others would agree to move the court. You and Flower know that.”

Chime persisted, “We don’t know that, and you don’t know what Stone thinks. Nobody knows what Stone thinks.”

Moon gritted his teeth. “If you don’t be quiet, I’m going to bite you.”

He didn’t know if Chime believed him, but at least he stopped talking.

Chapter Nine

Moon woke to early dawn light and the cool air from the open door to the court. Chime, completely undeterred by their argument, was a warm presence against his back. Moon pushed himself up on one elbow and groaned under his breath. If Delin's family decided against them, this was going to be an interesting day—interesting in the sense that he would like to just fly off and enjoy it in an entirely different part of the Three Worlds.

He could hear the others already stirring; Jade walked out into the main room first. She went to the doorway and glared out at the sky, already lightening to a clear blue. "It could have rained," she said under her breath. "We've got no reason to stay here now."

"It's going to look suspicious." Balm followed her and leaned in the doorway to look worriedly at the sky. She told the others, "The Gerent gave us a firm answer last night, and we'd already said we needed to return to the court as quickly as possible."

She was right. The sky was almost cloudless. Everyone had eaten heavily yesterday, more than enough for the flight to the mainland; they should already be in the air. If the Islanders asked what they were waiting for, Moon didn't know how Jade would explain it.

Root wandered over to the doorway and looked out uncertainly. "What do we do if they don't come?"

"They'll be here," Jade said, turning away from the door. It was hard to tell if she was reassuring Root or herself.

Chime got the brazier lit in the main room and made tea. It gave them something to do, which helped a little, but Jade and Balm still stalked the empty rooms. The others were restive. Root kept climbing the walls and trying to hang off the door-frames, and Song and Branch bickered like bored children. After a while, Moon felt he had to do something with the younger warriors. Jade was so tense she hadn't been able together spines down for half the morning. "Maybe I should take them fishing?" he said to Chime. He thought it was either that or kill them.

"You almost drowned yesterday," Chime said, banging the iron kettle onto the holder. "You want to go out there again?"

“Yes.” Moon had been almost killed too many times to develop an aversion to anything. “I wasn’t planning to go fishing under the moss net.”

He looked up to find Jade standing over him, her frills stiff with exasperation. “If you would take them out of here for a while, I’d be grateful—”

Then Balm ducked through the doorway from the entrance hall. “Someone’s coming,” she whispered anxiously. “I think this is it.”

“Tell them to come in.” Jade turned to the younger warriors. “Go out to the court! Don’t make it look as if we’re waiting for something.”

Song, Branch, and Root scrambled to obey. Moon stayed where he was, sitting beside the brazier. After a moment of twitching uncertainly, Chime settled back down on his cushion. Jade shifted to Arbora, probably to get rid of most of her spines so they couldn’t flare out in agitation.

Then Balm walked in with Delin, Niran, and Endell-liani. Endell-liani inclined her head in greeting and said, “Forgive the intrusion, but Delin-Evran-lindel said that you were expecting him?”

Delin said, “We were invited for breakfast,” and winked at Moon. Niran flushed dark with mortification.

“What if they don’t come?” Root said. “What if they keep the pearls and cheat us?”

Moon, stretched out in the sun and trying to nap, hissed under his breath. They were at the metal ruin on the shore of the Yellow Sea, up on the top platform. They had arrived yesterday evening and stayed the night. It was now afternoon, another clear day with a bright sun and a good, cool wind off the water. With a dry edge to her voice, Jade told Root, “Then we go back home empty-handed and I look like a fool. Now be quiet.”

Delin had arranged to meet them here with three of his family’s wind-ships. The other Islanders might guess that the departure of the ships only a day after the Raksura had left had something to do with an arrangement to help move the court, but they wouldn’t be able to prove it. Delin seemed to think that was all that mattered. He had explained, “They may talk, but that’s all. We have always been explorers. We make the connections with other races that allow the trading guilds to open new markets and prosper, to let our scholars increase their knowledge. We go as we will and have never been under their direction.”

Moon hoped he was right.

At dawn this morning, Jade had sent Balm and Branch on ahead to the court, to let them know that the boats were coming. It was hard to believe that the entire court could make ready to move in just these few days, but Moon was willing to be surprised.

He had spent a lot of time last evening and this morning out scouting, going alone so he could stretch his wings and cover more distance. He had looked for signs that they had been followed by Fell or suspiciously low-flying cloud-walkers or anything else out of the ordinary, but he had found nothing. Just sea and dunes and salt marsh.

Some distance to the north, he did stumble on a small camp of groundlings who were following a narrow river inland. They had white silky fur that rippled in the wind, and bony crests like sea birds. They also had good eyesight; they spotted Moon at a higher altitude than most groundlings could have managed, and stared with interest and not much apparent fear, shielding their eyes against the sun. Moon supposed that if he had been Stone he would have taken the chance to stop and chat—but he wasn't, and he didn't.

He had returned to find Chime hunting among the tidal pools, and Song and Root playing in the surf. Jade sat on the beach, her blue and gray colors vivid against the golden sand. As he landed next to her, she asked, "Any sign?"

"Nothing." He shifted to groundling, feeling uneasy. The ruler who had taken control of the cloud-walker would have known they had reached the Islanders, but not what they had done there. If they were lucky, it hadn't had a chance to pass on even that much information to the others. But Moon wasn't willing to trust to luck. He said, "Fell don't give up."

"I know," she said, absently drawing her claws through the sand. "They should be here looking for us. I'd worry less if they were."

They had all eaten. Root and Song had played in the waves until they were half-drowned. Moon felt he knew every pace of the surrounding marshland. At this point, there wasn't anything to do but sleep in the sun and wait. The metal of the platform was baking hot, and lying on it in groundling form felt like a luxury. Groundlings with skin unprotected by scales or fur shouldn't be able to touch metal this hot without burns, so Moon had always been careful not to indulge in it in front of anyone.

"But what's to stop them from keeping the pearls?" Root persisted. He was on watch, and he, at least, was wide awake.

Chime and Song, sprawled near Moon on the platform, both

snarled in chorus. But with weary patience, Jade said, "Their people are traders. For them, baubles like that are a measure of trust."

Baubles, Moon thought, grimly amused. There had been times when a few baubles would have made all the difference in the world.

At least it gave Root something to think about. He was quiet long enough that the sun lulled Moon to sleep again. The next time Root spoke, it was to say, "Something's coming in from the sea."

Moon rolled to his feet, almost shoulder to shoulder with Jade. In the distance, a shape danced on the horizon, but he couldn't tell if it was on the surface of the water or flying above it. There was no distinctive scent in the wind, animal or otherwise.

"Wait here." Moon shifted and jumped off the platform.

He had only made a third of the distance before he could see it wasn't one shape but three: three long wind-ships, their fan-like sails spread, making their way towards the shore.

Moon had been on boats that sailed on the water, but he had never had the freedom to climb all over one in his shifted form and see how it worked. The wind-ship was bigger and more interesting than any he had been on before. Under the main deck toward the bow were two large holds, empty except for food stores for the crew and clay water jars. The holds took up most of the room, but toward the stern there were smaller cabins for sleeping and eating, and one solely for the storage of maps, drawn on thick reed paper and rolled into lacquered wood cases.

The wind-ship's sails were like giant fans, unfolding out from the large mast when the sailors pulled and adjusted the ropes. A ladder on the mast ascended to a little wooden box at the very top.

"What's in here?" Chime asked, leaning over to look in. "Oh, sorry," he added in Altanic.

An Islander woman was inside, apparently acting as look-out. She was very young, dressed like the other sailors in pants cropped at the knee and a loose shirt, her white hair kept off her face by a patterned scarf. She looked startled by their sudden appearance, but not panicked or upset.

"Will these ships hold the entire court?" Moon asked, boosting himself up to cling to one side of the box. Up here, the view was unobstructed by the sails or the bulk of the ship below. The marshland spread out below them like a green carpet, the hills a brown and gold haze in the distance.

"It'll be crowded, but I think we can do it." Chime hung on to the

other side of the box, lifting his head so the wind stirred his spines. "If they have to, the warriors can spend most of their time in the air."

Jade was over on the second ship with Root and Song, speaking to Diar, who was in command of the expedition. Ten Islander sailors crewed each ship, most members of Delin's extended family. Niran was in charge of this vessel, and hadn't made any effort to speak to them. His attitude still made it plain that he would rather not be here at all.

Moon felt a light touch and looked down to see the look-out run her finger down one of his claws, as if fascinated by the smooth texture and the bronze and black banding. He didn't move, too bemused to react.

"Delin's waving at us," Chime said, leaning out to peer down at the deck. "I think he wants us to come down."

Delin stood on the deck with Niran. Moon let go of the box, leapt out, and cleared the sail to glide down to the deck. Chime landed beside him a moment later and they both shifted to groundling. Niran's jaw was set and his golden skin flushed with irritation. That's going to be a problem, Moon thought. It was also going to become annoying. Both he and Chime knew better than to pull on ropes or touch anything else that looked delicate; if Niran had difficulty dealing with them, it was going to be interesting to see how he handled it when curious Arbora were climbing all over the place.

Delin just smiled. "You like our ship? It is the Valendera, the oldest of our craft, built by my father's father. The others are the Dathea and the Indala."

Chime said, "Yes, but how do they fly?" Earlier, he had climbed over the side and down under the hull, trying to see what kept the ship in the air. Moon had just figured that some things flew and some didn't, and since the ship was from a flying island, its chances of doing so were better than most.

But Delin said, "I'll show you," and led them back toward a small deck cabin in the stern. Niran followed with an air of unspoken protest.

When Delin opened the heavy door, Moon saw that crystals in the walls and roof allowed in light while blocking the weather. Built-in benches along the wall doubled as storage chests. A shelf held lacquered map cases. But in the center of the cabin was a wooden pedestal with a heavy metal lid. It was etched with glyphs in the Islander language, and other symbols Moon hadn't seen before. Metal handles stood out from the top of the pedestal, apparently so it could

be turned, allowing the symbols to point to different directions.

Delin touched the lid, smiling reverently. "This contains the sustainer, the engine which controls the ship's speed and direction." He slid a bolt aside and opened the top of the pedestal. Inside was a chunk of gray rock, shot through with glittering metallic elements. He looked at them, brows lifted inquiringly. "Do you know what this is?"

Moon had no idea. He guessed, "A magic rock."

Chime's face was rapt. He looked up at Delin, smiling. "A piece of a flying island."

Delin nodded. "A small piece, a very important piece, from the heart of an island. One of the things we search for in our explorations are fragments of islands, uninhabited and too small to be of use. We excavate and look for these rocks, which are buried throughout them."

Chime looked like he desperately wanted to touch the rock, but knew he shouldn't. "So you turn the case—"

"And the ship turns with it." Delin carefully closed the lid again. "The force of the sustainer propels us. It allows the ship to float on the waves of invisible force that cross the Three Worlds. The sails are only to take advantage of the wind for extra speed. We can't be becalmed like an ocean-going ship."

It was probably a stupid question, but Moon couldn't help himself. He asked, "When you take the rocks out, do the islands sink?"

"If we take too many, yes," Delin told him. "There is a plateau in the north that is said to be a large flying island that fell to the ground. They believe several civilizations fought over possession of it, and that their attempts to drive each other away caused the power inside the rock to stop working."

Chime stepped around the pedestal, examining the rest of the cabin. In the back wall, a small compartment held a heavy bowl of water with a sliver of metal shaped like a fish floating in it. Chime touched the bowl. "What's this?"

That one Moon recognized. "It always points to south, so they can navigate." He touched the fish, making it spin and bob.

"How do you navigate when you fly?" Delin asked.

"I always know which way south is." The words were out before Moon remembered that he didn't actually know if that was a Raksuran trait or not. He slid a glance at Chime.

But Chime nodded as he leaned down to study the little metal fish. He said absently, "It's a pull toward the heart point of the Three

Worlds. We all feel it, including the Arbora.”

Delin was already opening his writing box, but Niran stared, disbelieving. He repeated, “You always know where south is.”

Moon and Chime both pointed. A moment later the metal fish steadied in its bowl, seconding their opinion. Niran folded his arms, his face still skeptical. Exasperated, Moon had to ask, “Why would we lie about that?”

Delin sat down on one of the benches built into the wall, smiling mildly as he got out his writing instrument. “I’m sure a test could be arranged.”

That took up the rest of the afternoon.

Below them, the marshes gave way to plains studded with scrubby trees. The wind changed as they traveled further inland, and the sailors folded the sails up; the ships then moved with only the sustainer to power them. It was slower, but they still made good progress. Another benefit of traveling on a flying boat was that you didn’t have to stop to sleep or eat; Moon thought the steady progress of the ships would come close to making up for their slower speed.

In the early evening, Moon took Root and Song hunting, and they brought back a couple of big flightless birds, similar to vargit, for the Islanders. By the time they got back, the setting sun was turning the sky a warm gold.

Diar, on the Dathea, thanked them with genuine enthusiasm. “We usually live off grain porridge and dried root crops on these trips, and at home every meat other than fish is imported, costly, and not fresh.” She was older than her brother Niran, short and strongly built. She didn’t seem to share Niran’s reservations or, if she did, she hid it better.

While the crew carried their catch away, Moon remembered something he had meant to tell the younger warriors. “Don’t eat in your shifted form in front of the Islanders.” Some of the crew were openly nervous of them, some curious, and others cautious. Watching warriors eat would appall most groundlings, and it was too easy to imagine Root dragging a fresh kill up onto the ship’s deck.

Song nodded understanding, but Root had to ask, “Why not?”

“Because you’re disgusting,” Chime told him. “Even we think so.” Moon didn’t think he was exaggerating; Chime had been an Arbora for most of his life, and the mentors and teachers ate more like groundlings than Raksura.

Root bristled, then looked at Moon, and meekly lowered his

spines.

Each ship had a special room below for cooking, with a fire in a heavy metal container. The Islanders cut the birds up, mixed them with root vegetables from their stores, and cooked it all in clay pots. Moon was still full from eating this morning, but it smelled so appetizing that accepting a bowl to be polite was no hardship.

Afterwards, he went up on the deck. Big lanterns were lit on the prow, but most of the ship was in shadow. Many of the Islanders on the Valendera had gone below to sleep or sit at the long table in the crew's common room. The decks of the other two ships were empty except for a couple of sailors on watch. Root and Song were over on the Dathea, and Chime had gone up on top of the steering cabin to sleep. Moon didn't know where Jade was until he caught a glimpse of blue and gray in the light of the bow lantern.

He took a step in that direction, then made himself turn back. He was leaving after they moved the court, and there was no point in... There was just no point.

He wandered back down the deck, to a platform where coils of rope were stacked. Sitting there, he had a good view over the railing.

The night air was like cool silk against his skin. The other two ships were half-lit shapes to either side, moving in near silence. When he flew under his own power, the terrain flashed by; at the slower pace and lower altitude of the ship it was much easier to see and oddly fascinating to watch. He caught flickers of movement in the tall grass and the trees, and hints of scent in the breeze, but he was too well fed to feel any urge to obey the reflexive impulse to hunt.

Then he heard a light step on the boards. Jade climbed onto the platform and sat near him. She wore her Arbora form, her colors soft and muted in the shadow. She curled up her tail, wrapped her arms around her knees, and said, "If you stand by the ladder, you can hear them talking below. I was listening to what they said about us."

Moon lifted his brows. It was always a good idea to be cautious, but her expression didn't seem urgent, so she must not have heard anyone plotting against them.

Jade continued, "They say we're not nearly as savage as Niran led them to believe." One corner of her mouth lifted in a smile. "They think Root is cute."

Moon twisted around to look over at the Dathea. The moonlight illuminated Root and Song sitting on the railing in groundling form. Root flicked at Song's hair, apparently in an attempt to get her to shift

and rip his head off. Moon considered intervening, but he figured the situation would work itself out in a moment. "Would they like to keep him?"

"I may ask." Jade sounded amused. "They call you 'the quiet one.'"

Moon supposed it was true. Over on the other ship, Song pushed Root off the railing. He tumbled, shifting in mid-air, and caught himself before he crashed into a tree. As he flapped back up to the ship, Moon said, "It's hard to believe he's related to Branch."

"He isn't. Though they've always been close. Root's other clutch-mates were all Arbora." She absently rubbed at the polished wooden boards, looking thoughtful. "Sometimes there's a division, among the warriors, between those whose mothers were Arbora and those whose mothers were queens. Branch's clutch-brother is a good example of that." Her voice turned dry. "He's too clever to push me, so I have no excuse to give him the beating he deserves."

Moon turned back to look at her, frowning. If Branch wasn't related to Root, then his name might not mean tree branch, but... He said, warily, "Branch's clutch-brother is River? And there's another warrior called Drift?"

Jade nodded absently. "They were one of Amber's clutches. The other two clutch-mates were consorts, but they didn't survive. Why do you ask?"

Moon considered not answering, but he didn't owe River any favors. "My first day at the colony, River and Drift told me to leave."

Jade tilted her head, eyes narrowing in annoyance. "Did they." She looked out across the dark forest. "River is one of the warriors who sleeps with Pearl."

That... somehow isn't a surprise, Moon thought. It certainly explained River's attitude.

Still sounding irritated, Jade said, "Queens and consorts always have warrior and Arbora lovers; that's not the problem. And it isn't as if I think she should be alone. But with Pearl's consort dead, it's as if River thinks he's taken that place. He's not a consort, and sleeping in her bower doesn't give him a higher place in the court."

Moon had noticed that sex among the Arbora seemed informal, and he had assumed it was that way among the Aeriats as well. When Moon was younger, he had always made it a point to try to figure out the local customs. It had taken him some time to realize that just because someone offered to have sex with you didn't mean he or she

was supposed to or that accepting wouldn't get you killed. But every groundling settlement had different rules, and often there were different customs even within individual tribes and cities, and after a time he had just given up on it. It was something else that had made the Cordans' camp an easy place to live; it had all been decided for him.

"The last place I lived, the elders chose who lived together. People didn't always listen," he added, remembering the rumor about Kavath and Selis' cousin. "But it mostly worked out."

Jade hesitated, her claws working absently on the wooden platform. "Stone told me he found you living in a groundling settlement." She tilted her head, watching him directly. "Was it very hard to leave?"

"In a way." Moon couldn't keep the irony out of his voice; Stone obviously hadn't told her the whole story. "One of the women I was living with saw me shift, and thought I was a Fell. She poisoned me and told the others. They took me up into the jungle and staked me out to die." He heard her startled hiss, and finished, grimly, "They were Cordans. The Fell moved across their land, from city to city, town to town, killing and eating and moving on. They have reason to be afraid."

She was still a moment, watching him. "You're defending them."

Moon bit his lip and said nothing. He couldn't defend them, but he didn't want to listen to anyone else condemn them, either. Until you had seen a groundling settlement ravaged by the Fell, you couldn't understand. "If she hadn't seen me, I'd still be living there."

Jade shook her head a little. "But would you be happy?"

When Moon left the Indigo Cloud court, it would be so people wouldn't ask him questions like this anymore. Being warm, dry, able to find food, shelter, in friendly or at least not openly hostile company, were the only things that had ever mattered. He said, "That was never the point."

She was quiet for so long he thought she would leave. Moon couldn't see the point in talking to him, either. Then he felt a gentle touch, as Jade drew her fingers through his hair.

The touch moved to the back of his neck, drifting over the vulnerable skin that Pearl had scratched. Her hand slid down his back, and he realized she was giving him time to escape. But when she pressed against his side, he leaned into her warmth.

She brushed her cheek against his. In Arbora form her softer

scales had the texture of rough velvet. Every muscle in his body went tense, heat coiling through him. You told yourself you weren't going to do this, he thought. Except it was hard to hold to that with Jade's arm around his waist, her breath in his ear, her teeth gently nipping the back of his neck. And if he didn't stop now, he wasn't going to stop.

He jerked away from her, scrambling to his feet. He rasped out, "I can't," and shifted. He leapt up and away, clinging to the mast for a moment before pushing off.

He landed on the cabin roof with a loud thump. Chime, lying on the warm wood in groundling form, started and blinked at him. "What's wrong?" he asked sleepily.

"Nothing." Moon folded his wings and started to sit down.

Then Jade thumped down onto the planks. Badly startled, Moon went into a defensive crouch. Chime yelped and curled into a ball, arms over his head. Jade whispered rapidly, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that. But it's just that you're here." She hissed in frustration and leapt into the air.

Moon eased back to sit down and shifted to groundling. Chime sat up, breathing hard, one hand pressed to his chest. He gasped, "I thought you were going to fight."

"No. Not fight." Moon didn't intend to explain further.

From somewhere below, he heard Niran's voice, demanding wearily, "What are they doing up there?"

After a time, Chime grumbled and lay back down, moving around, trying to get comfortable again. He had just settled down when Moon heard a rush through the air as someone glided over. Root landed lightly on the cabin roof and folded his wings. Sounding embarrassed, he said, "Jade threw me off the other boat. Can I stay here with you?"

"No," Chime snapped.

"If you're quiet," Moon told him.

Root shifted to groundling and curled up on Chime's other side, despite Chime's hissing at him. Moon wasn't sure if Jade was fed up with Root or just fed up with male Raksura in general.

His reaction to her had caught him off guard, frightened him. Self-control, making decisions and sticking to them, had always been important to his survival.

Since the moment he had met Stone, he felt like he didn't know

what he was doing. He couldn't afford to be like this.

The ship was quiet, nothing moving near them except the wind, but it was a long time before Moon could relax enough to lie down and sleep.

The next day dawned cool and damp, with gray clouds obscuring the sky and ground mist winding through the trees below. Moon managed to communicate to the others, even Chime, that he preferred to be alone, and went up to sit on the railing of the prow. From there he could watch the forested valleys roll by under the ship.

The trees were tall with heavy foliage at the very top, with clumps of dark blue fruit. Big crab-like creatures with colorful shells clung to the top branches, eating the fruit. They were smaller than branch-spiders, but Moon found the resemblance close enough. They might be good to eat, though.

Absorbed in the view, he was still aware that one of the Islanders had come to sit on the deck ten paces or so behind him. He didn't realize it was Delin until he heard the rustle of paper. He looked to see the old man sitting cross-legged, a light wooden tablet braced on his knees, sketching something with close concentration.

Moon hopped down to go look at it. He could scratch out the characters for Altanic and Kedaic in ways that were readable, but he had never been able to draw an image that even he could recognize. He crouched beside Delin, studying the sketch. It was the ship's prow, with someone perched on it, and it took him a long moment to realize who it was. "That's me?" He had seen his groundling form in clear water or glass or polished metal, but never from the side like this. Stone was right—he was all skin and bones.

"It is." Delin smiled, adding a last few strokes with the charcoal stick. "I will add it to the book, and title it 'Moon, Consort of Indigo Cloud.'"

He wanted to be in the book, but it should be the truth. "Maybe just title it 'Moon.'"

Delin's look was thoughtful. "You are not of the same court as the others?"

"No. I'm just... visiting." There was no reason to say anything more, but Moon found himself admitting, "I don't have a court."

"I thought your people did not live alone."

Moon shrugged. "They don't, apparently."

Delin nodded, taking that in. "I have read that young consorts are usually shy creatures, who do not venture far from their homes." Moon couldn't help a derisive snort. Delin added, with a touch of irony in his expression, "Perhaps they do not understand you."

He was probably right, and it probably worked both ways.

After a while Delin went below, and Moon went back to the view.

Towards afternoon they were over the hills and the heavier jungle. Moon thought they were nearly to the river, with only a short distance to go.

Then Chime, who was taking in the view from the top of the mast, called out, "Someone's coming!" Moon snapped around to look, and saw Chime pointed towards something ahead of them in the distance. A shape in the air headed their way. Moon shifted, standing up to taste the air. It was a Raksura.

Chime glided down from the mast to land next to Moon. "I can't tell who it is yet." He squinted into the distance, frowning. "I don't know why they're sending someone to us. They should know we're on the way."

Good question, Moon thought. Either Balm and Branch hadn't arrived, or... something else had.

The warrior finally drew close enough for Chime to identify him as a young male called Sand. Jade, Root, and Song were waiting with Moon and Chime by the time Sand landed on the Valendera's deck. He shifted to groundling, breathing hard from what must have been a hard, fast flight, and said to Jade, "Stone said not to bring the groundling boats any closer. The Fell have been to the colony again."

Jade's spines were already flared with agitation. At this she went deadly still. "What do you mean 'been to the colony?' They attacked?"

Sand shook his head hurriedly. "No, no. A ruler came again, with dakti. Pearl wanted to let them in to talk, but they wouldn't. Flower said it was because they knew Stone was there. Then they left."

Chime hissed; he looked sick. "You could have said that first."

Moon looked away, keeping the relief off his face. Not too late; just hovering on the edge of disaster. As usual. He turned back to Sand. "Who knows about the wind-ships? Who did Balm and Branch tell?"

Sand looked uncertainly from Jade to Moon. "Just Stone and Flower, and me, so I could carry the message. They said not to tell

anyone else.” He turned back to Jade. “Stone wants you to leave the boats out here and come in to meet him at the Blue Stone Temple.”

Chime told Moon, “That’s near the valley where we went hunting.”

Jade’s tail lashed. “Good. We’ll need a chance to make plans.” Moon hoped she meant, make plans so that we can load the ships without giving Pearl a chance to tell the Fell about it.

“What are we going to tell the Islanders?” Song asked, looking around the deck. They had been speaking in the Raksuran language, so no one had overheard. All three ships had stopped, and the Dathea and the Indala had drawn up alongside the Valendera. The crews were out on deck, waiting for news.

“The truth,” Jade said. She turned to where Delin, Niran, and Diar waited near the deck cabin.

They took the news well, though Niran folded his arms and looked as if this was no more than he had expected. But as Delin pointed out, if there were no danger from the Fell, then none of them would be here in the first place.

Diar seemed undisturbed as well. She said, “We can rig the ships the same way we do for storms. We find a clearing and tie off to sturdy trees or rocks, then winch the ships down out of the wind.”

“We’ll send someone to you soon,” Jade told her.

The Blue Stone Temple lay in the forest, just over the hills from the plain with the statues. It was a big square structure buried in the trees and half-covered by flowering vines. Made from solid slabs of stone, it was open on all four sides, with a large skylight in the flat roof. The large pool it was built over was its most unique feature. Its square edges had been softened by the forest’s mossy carpet. The blue-tinted stone blended into the shadows under the trees, and Moon would have been hard pressed to find it on his own.

As they circled down to it, Moon caught a strong stench of death; a large bloated carcass of a waterbeast floated in the pool.

As they landed on the temple’s roof, Moon spotted Stone’s distinctive shape dropping down out of the clouds. Two smaller shapes accompanied him.

“That’s Balm and Branch,” Jade said, sounding preoccupied. “If we can start the journey tomorrow...” She turned away and dropped down through the skylight into the temple.

Jumping down after her, Chime said, “I was thinking, if we can

use the ships to cache some of our supplies away from the colony, then come back later—”

Root, Song, and Sand followed and Moon stood there a moment, shaking his head. None of them seemed to be thinking about what they were going to do about Pearl. They seemed to believe she would snap out of it once they got her away from the colony and her visits with the Fell.

He stepped over the edge of the opening and dropped down into the temple. Inside it was just a big empty space supported by square pillars, high-ceilinged and open. The light was tinted green by the screens of foliage, the stone stained dark with moss. The reliefs on the walls had been rubbed away by time and weather. Chime, shifted to groundling, was crouched on the paving, sketching out a map in the leaf mold while Jade, Song, Sand, and Root watched.

Moon walked toward the open side that faced the pool and stood at the edge of the platform. The water was dark green, thick with scum, the bloated waterbeast lying at the far edge. It looked as if something had killed it, dragged it here, then discarded it, and their arrival had driven away any scavengers. Insects skated across the water, but nothing else moved. The stench of the carcass was worse than the hunters’ tanning court.

Moon shifted to groundling so his sense of smell wouldn’t be as acute. If they were going to spend much time here, it might be worth it to try to move the thing, but if it fell apart it would be worse.

He heard the rush of air above as Stone arrived, and turned to see the dark shape dropping through the skylight. He carried Flower in one big talon. He set her down and shifted to groundling. As Flower shook her hair out of her eyes and straightened her smock, Balm landed beside her. “I’ll keep watch up here,” Branch called to them, looking down through the skylight.

“You’ve done it,” Flower said to Jade, smiling. “We knew you would.”

Jade smiled back. She had tried to seem matter-of-fact about all this, but now she couldn’t help betraying a little pride over their achievement. She said, “So far. Now we’re trying to think how to get everyone on the ships as quickly as possible, before the Fell return.”

Chime looked up at Flower. “I thought we could get the hunters to cache the heavier supplies, maybe in the upper river caves. Then—”

Flower sat down opposite Chime to examine his map. Balm shifted to groundling and looked over her shoulder.

Stone stood apart, and Moon went over to him. He said, low-voiced, "They told you about the cloud-walker?"

"Yes." Stone kept his eyes on the others. "The Fell didn't come anywhere near the court until yesterday, and Pearl never left while you were gone."

Moon couldn't help feeling relieved. At least someone else was thinking about this. "But others did."

"Yes. A third of the warriors and probably half the Arbora, like they do every day." Stone's expression was ironic. "But most of them didn't know Jade was going to the Yellow Sea."

"And you trust the ones who did?" Moon persisted.

Stone admitted, "I used to."

Moon hissed in frustration. This wasn't going to work, no matter how clever Chime, Flower and Jade's plans were, unless they dealt with Pearl. And no one seemed to want to admit that Pearl needed dealing with. "When you get to the new colony she'll just—"

"Wait." Stone tilted his head, frowning. "Do you smell that?"

"Of course I smell that. Will you listen to me—"

"No, there's something else—"

Moon heard a rush of wings overhead and spun around, looking toward the skylight. It sounded like a number of Raksura, but Branch hadn't given a warning. He tried to shift... and nothing happened.

Startled, he looked at Stone. Stone muttered, "Oh, no. This is all we need."

Pearl dropped through the skylight and landed on the stone floor, her scales a burst of brilliant gold and indigo against the stained paving.

Chapter Ten

Pearl stalked forward, her spines flaring. Half a dozen warriors landed behind her, shifting to groundling as they settled on the paving. Branch stood among them, as well as River and Drift.

Chime shoved to his feet, fell back a step, and threw a worried glance at Jade and Flower. Root and Song just looked confused. Everyone had shifted to groundling. Moon couldn't tell if that was automatic deference to Pearl or if she had used her queen's power to make them do it, the way she was keeping Moon from shifting back to Raksura. Jade just folded her arms and looked frustrated.

Pearl bared her teeth. "So here you all are, speaking in secret."

Stone growled in pure exasperation. "Pearl, what are you doing?"

Desperate, Balm turned to Jade. "I didn't tell—"

"I know it wasn't you," Jade said quietly.

That was when Moon registered the guilt on Branch's young face. Stupid, stupid little... This was like a bad joke.

"Branch." Flower didn't raise her voice, but Branch flinched. "It was your idea to come here. Balm said we should meet at the cave above the Bird Valley, but you said this was better because it was further away." She lifted a brow. "You fooled us very easily. We didn't suspect a thing."

Helplessly, Branch turned to Pearl. The queen said, "He was being loyal."

"Loyal?" Jade's spines flared. "We have to speak in secret because you keep telling the Fell everything we do!"

Pearl rounded on her in fury. "I've told the Fell nothing!" she snapped. "I'm trying to buy time." She turned to glare at Stone. "By not letting them in to talk you've made them suspicious and more likely to attack." Her gaze went to Moon. Her lips drew back in a sneer as she paced toward him.

Moon circled warily away from her, knowing better than to let her get within arm's reach. His skin itched with the urge to shift, but

he was trapped in groundling form. He saw River, standing back with Branch and the other warriors, smile derisively. Pearl stopped as Moon backed away. She tilted her head at Jade, saying, "So you didn't take him yet. Having second thoughts about polluting our bloodline with a stray?"

Jade hissed between her teeth. How does she know that? Moon thought incredulously, torn between humiliation on his part and fury on Jade's. It wasn't as if she hadn't tried.

"Buy time?" Stone repeated. "How? The Fell want to kill us all—"

Pearl shook her head. "That's not what they want."

In pointed disbelief, Jade said, "Then what do they want? Tell us. I'm sure we'll be fascinated."

"Fascinated isn't the word." Pearl hesitated, then drew in a sharp breath. "They want to join with us."

Everyone stood there for a moment, still with surprise. A rustle of confusion flitted through the warriors, though none of them dared to speak. Even River and Branch and the others closest to Pearl looked uncertain, as if they hadn't heard this before, and wished they weren't hearing it now. Moon thought, That can't mean what I think it means.

Flower stepped up to stand next to Jade, her expression caught between incredulity and dismay. She said, "The Fell told you this? When?"

"Not long ago. The first time they came to the colony," Pearl said. Under the concentrated stares of Stone, Jade, and Flower, her spines seemed to droop a little. River and her other warriors didn't look so confident anymore. Branch looked sick.

Stone shook his head, unwilling to understand. "By join, do you mean eat? Because..."

"No." Pearl lifted a hand to her head, and for a heartbeat she looked exhausted. "Their flight is failing too. They said their progenitor died a few months ago. That's when they first approached me."

Before this, Moon would have given a lot to see something that shocked Stone, but he didn't want it to be this something. Stone said, "You're saying they want to breed with us."

Pearl looked away.

The temple was quiet except for the buzz of flies from the pool. Even the trilling birdcalls from the forest seemed distant. Chime was the first to break the silence.

“That’s not possible,” he said, his voice thick with horror. He turned to Flower. “Is it?”

Everybody turned to Flower. She wet her lips, and said reluctantly, “It might be. The mentors who study the Fell have always believed that we came from the same source. That the similarities between us and the rulers are too pronounced to be coincidence.”

Moon had a terrible realization, and he had to ask, “Stone, at Sky Copper, you said the clutches were missing?” Though he kept his voice low, it snapped everyone’s attention to him as if he had shouted.

“I couldn’t find the bodies of the royal clutch in the nursery,” Stone answered, and rubbed his eyes. “The Fell took them.”

Took them alive, Moon thought, sick. Alive as prisoners of the Fell.

“How could you... how could you conceal this?” Jade stared at Pearl, and her voice came out in a low hiss. “I should rip your heart out.”

“I didn’t say yes, you stupid little child. I’m not insane.” Pearl bared her teeth. “But I didn’t say no, either. I knew what would happen if I did.” She stepped back, her tail lashing uneasily. “I didn’t expect them to attack Sky Copper. I thought they just wanted us.”

“Our nursery has Arbora and warriors, babies and fledglings.” Flower looked ill and old, the skin of her face so pale and translucent Moon thought he could see her bones. She pushed her hair off of her forehead and paced away a few steps. “Sky Copper has... had at least one fledgling queen, and probably two younger consorts.”

“Why didn’t the Fell join with them then, if that’s what they wanted?” Chime burst out. “They must need Arbora, too. Why destroy...” He hesitated uneasily. “Unless they made Sky Copper the same offer.”

“And their queen said no,” Pearl finished, watching them. “That’s what I believe happened.”

Stone stared at her in helpless dismay. “Why didn’t you tell me this, Pearl? Or tell Flower or Jade, or Petal or Bone or Knell? You didn’t think we had a right to know?”

“Because I knew you didn’t trust me,” she said wearily. “You’d just accuse me of treating with the Fell again.”

Flower flung her hands in the air. “Pearl, I didn’t accuse you of that until you let a Fell ruler into the colony to speak to you. You told me nothing!”

Pearl hissed at her. “There was nothing you could do. Nothing to be done. This was my burden to bear. You’ve said your scrying is useless. You can’t see anything. None of the mentors can.”

Flower turned away from her with an angry shake of her head.

“You could set a trap!” Moon shouted, unable to stand it a moment more. “You have something they want, so you make them think they have you and then you kill them. You don’t negotiate, you don’t let them...”

Pearl snapped around to face him, the barely restrained violence making him fall back a step. “You little idiot, you don’t know anything!”

“Stop it!” Flower held up her hand. “All of you be quiet.” Her head was cocked, as if she was listening intently. “Stone, there’s something here.”

Stone turned away from Pearl, scanning the empty temple. “Where?”

Moon looked around too, hampered by trying to keep Pearl in his peripheral vision. Nothing moved in the still air. Through the archway he could see the pool, a cloud of insects humming above the scummy surface and the carcass. “The water.” The words came out before he finished the thought. The opaque water, that might be a pace deep, or twenty paces, thirty paces. The stench that concealed any trace of what might have passed through the temple...

Green water erupted from the pool as something huge burst up out of it. Moon dove sideways and shifted in mid-motion, even before he realized it was a major kethel.

It plunged up the steps, charging under the archway, and headed straight for Stone. Stone shifted into his Raksuran form just before it struck him, bowling him over backwards. Moon lunged for it as it passed, but a casual blow from the kethel’s tail sent him flying, bouncing off the paving before he skidded to a stop. He lifted his head in time to see the kethel pin Stone against a pillar, and thought, Pearl let us shift; she didn’t know the Fell were here.

Heart pounding, Moon rolled to his feet. Bodies sprawled on the ground; the kethel had knocked everyone across the temple, and some of them hadn’t been quick enough to shift. He started toward Stone but someone shrieked a warning and he spun back to face the pool.

A second, smaller kethel heaved up out of the water and surged up the stairs into the temple. It ducked under the square archway and stopped. The horns studding its head were draped in fragments of the

grasseater corpse that had concealed the Fell's distinctive odor.

Moon braced himself to leap for its throat, for the thinner scaled skin at the edge of its armored collar. He had to slow it down, give the others a chance to get away. Then he froze in shock. There was something on its chest, a bulbous, dark tumor, like the sac that had been attached to the cloud-walker's back. He had a heartbeat for the horrified thought, Oh, tell me that's not...

The sac split open as if sliced from the inside and dakti spilled out, ten or more. They dropped to the floor and bolted into the temple. The kethel grinned, the long jaw revealing a double row of fangs, and charged.

Then Jade hit the paving beside Moon, landing in a crouch. As the kethel lowered its head, sliding to a halt across the mossy stone, Moon darted to the left and Jade dove right. The kethel made a grab for Moon, whipping its head down, but he twisted away, feeling its talons brush against his furred wings.

Moon saw a flash of blue and gray pass over the kethel's armored forehead. The instant of distraction had allowed Jade to leap atop the creature's back. Snarling in fury, the kethel forgot Moon and reached up to claw at her. Moon lunged in, getting under its head, clawing up past the heavy armored plates on its chest. He ripped and tore at the softer scales of its throat. It shrieked in pain, but the wash of blood and ichor that flowed down its hide from above told Moon that Jade had just ripped out one of its eyes.

The big claws scraped at Moon from behind, catching in his wings and dragging him away. But Balm shot past him, leapt up to the kethel's throat to claw at the same spot, and tore at the jagged wounds Moon had left.

Moon ripped the disemboweling claws on his heels across the kethel's palm as he tore himself free. He leapt to the creature's shoulder, dodged a snap of its jaws, then swung atop its head.

He landed low on its skull and saw Jade climb back up the kethel's back; one of its wild blows must have knocked her off. Moon scrambled higher up the skull and got a precarious hold on the armored brow ridge, his claws slipping on the impervious scales. Looking down, he saw one of its eyes was half shut and leaking blood and pus, the lid ripped through. Keening in pain, the kethel twisted around to reach for Jade. Moon stretched forward and stabbed his hand into the remaining eye.

The convulsion flung him off. He slammed into the pavement. Stunned, he lifted his head to see the kethel reeling away, staggering

back toward the archways out of the temple. That's one, he thought, and shoved to his feet.

Warriors were scattered around, locked in bloody fights with dakti. Others lay unmoving on the pavement. He saw a dakti tackle Song, but Chime leapt on it from behind, tearing it off her. The kethel still fought Stone, the two big bodies writhing in combat, black and red blood running over the temple floor. Pearl, atop the kethel's head, tried to rip at its eyes, but it kept its head down, its jaw buried in Stone's throat. Pearl couldn't get purchase. She must have worked a claw in somewhere, because the kethel let go of Stone to fling its head back and knock her away.

Moon lunged forward to take advantage of the opening, but something beat him to it, the white form of an Arbora. Flower? he thought in dismay, as she leapt straight into the kethel's jaws. It snapped down on her, then reared back. Convulsing, it flopped over backward.

Moon made the distance to it in two long bounds and landed beside it as the big creature stiffened and went still. Not quite still—the pockets of loose skin in its cheeks moved, as if something inside was trying to get out.

Moon yelled in alarm, grabbed the lower jaw, planted his foot on the upper, and shoved. With a crack, the stiff jaw unlocked and Flower spilled out of the kethel's mouth in her groundling form. She landed on her hands and knees, gasping. The jagged end of a long piece of wood had been driven into the soft flesh at the back of the kethel's throat.

Moon released the jaw and leaned over Flower. He had to take a harsh breath before he could speak. The stench coming from the dead kethel's gullet made his throat raw. He couldn't imagine how Flower felt after much closer exposure to it.

"Are you all right?" He hadn't seen the stick in her hands in Arbora form, and obviously, neither had the kethel. She must have snatched it up in groundling form and shifted with it, hiding it with the same magic that hid groundling clothes and weapons, then shifted back in the kethel's mouth. Moon didn't know whether to be impressed or horrified.

She nodded, gripping his arm for support and letting him help her stand.

"I haven't done that in a while." She choked and leaned over to spit. "It's not a good idea. Stone?"

Moon turned, looking back, expecting to see Stone dragging himself upright. But he still lay where the kethel had dropped him, sprawled on his side on the temple floor. The kethel had torn rents in his scaled hide, and there was a bloody bite in his throat.

“Oh no,” Flower whispered. Moon’s heart contracted. He ran to Stone, barely pausing to rip apart a last wounded dakti that blundered into his way. He flung himself down, eye level with Stone.

This was the first time Moon had clearly seen Stone’s face in his other form, without the blurring effect that he wore like a cloak. His eyes were as big around as Moon’s head, slit in pain, and he panted through clenched fangs, a rough, desperate sound. Moon couldn’t tell if Stone saw him or not.

Moon heard a step behind him and twitched around. It was Jade. She knelt beside him, laid a hand on Stone’s cheek.

“His wings?” she asked, waiting tensely for the answer.

Flower had hurried around to Stone’s back.

“Not broken,” she reported. “He kept them folded.”

Moon was relieved. If Stone had given in to the impulse to use his wings to try to lever himself up under the kethel’s weight, it would have probably broken both, and that would have made his injuries even more devastating. If Stone hadn’t been an experienced and canny fighter, he would be dead.

Flower circled back around Stone’s body, anxiously looking over his wounds. “It’s bad, but he can heal. He’ll have to stay in this form. If he shifts, these wounds will kill him.”

Jade started to speak but a sound shattered the air, a wail of heart-deep loss and pain. It froze Moon in place for an instant, sliced open a buried memory of blood and broken bodies.

Not far away, River knelt over a body, Drift crouched next to him. The figure was in groundling form, twisted and broken. Moon pushed to his feet and moved close enough to see the face. It was Branch.

The others gathered around. Root was limping. Song, Sand, and a couple of Pearl’s warriors had bites and claw marks from the dakti. Chime had a gash across his chest, and Balm was so covered with kethel blood that Moon couldn’t tell if she was injured or not. Pearl stepped in, knelt beside River, and carefully touched Branch’s neck and face. Almost gently, she said, “He’s dead, River. I think the first kethel struck him.”

River made a noise again, a low moan of pain.

Jade hissed out a harsh breath. "Branch told you our plans, Pearl. What else did he do?"

Pearl stood, her claws working as if she wanted to use them on Jade. But she said reluctantly, "Branch was the one who brought me the first message from the Fell."

That's convenient, Moon thought, giving her a sideways look. But if Pearl had planned this trap, she wouldn't have let them shift to their Raksuran forms to fight. Much as he would like to suspect her, he couldn't get around that fact.

"Someone told the Fell we were meeting here," Jade said, a growl in her voice. "If it was Branch—"

"No!" River snarled at her. "Not Branch."

"After we got back to the colony and talked to Stone and Flower, I don't know where he went." Balm shook her head, appalled. "I went to rest... He could have left again..."

Pearl glared at Jade. "We'll deal with this later. We have to get back to the court. The Fell will already be there. All this was a ruse to get Stone and me away from the colony so they could attack."

"I know that," Jade snapped. She turned to Flower, who still sat beside Stone. "You'll stay with him?"

"I will." Flower nodded. "Send help when you can."

"The Islanders," Chime said suddenly. He turned to Moon. "If Branch was the one who betrayed us to the Fell—"

River rounded on him furiously. "It wasn't him!"

Moon ignored him. Chime was right. If Branch had told the Fell about the meeting here, then he would have told them about the flying boats. The Fell would know that groundlings were nearby and would search the area for them. He said, "I'll warn them."

"No." Pearl gave the order sharply, not bothering to look at him. "We need everyone to defend the court."

Moon tensed in rebellion. Pearl could mate with herself; he wasn't letting the Islanders die for her stubbornness and Branch's perfidy. But Flower said, "Let him go."

Moon turned to her. She was crouched on the floor, and her eyes were like mirrors, blind and opaque. She shook her head, suddenly normal again, the moment passing so quickly Moon thought he imagined it. She said again, "Let him go."

Pearl spat. "You're finally having a vision? Now?"

Jade just said, “Chime, go with Moon to warn the Islanders. Come to the colony as soon as you can.”

Moon flew back to the ships at Chime’s fastest pace. There was no sign of the Fell in this direction, but that didn’t mean they were safe.

Against his will, he was seeing Pearl’s situation from a different perspective now. He was beginning to think this had been the Fell’s plan all along, to make the other leaders of the court distrust her. Stone, Flower, and Jade hadn’t completely fallen for it, though Moon certainly had. But it had made them doubt her, perhaps kept Pearl from speaking to them until it was too late. It didn’t mean Moon trusted her any more than before, but it would be a relief if she wasn’t actively in the power of the Fell.

The tips of the ships’ masts came into sight, barely distinguishable among the trees. Moon slowed and circled in. All three vessels were moored to the ground with heavy ropes, about forty paces above the jungle floor.

Moon landed on the deck of the Valendera, Chime not far behind him. As startled sailors hurried toward them, Moon shifted to groundling. They halted around him, staring. The Fell blood that had been on Moon’s scales transferred to his clothes and skin. He felt punctures on his back and sides from the kethel’s claws, sharp pain in his ribs from slamming into the temple’s floor. Chime shifted, then winced and rubbed at the claw-slash on his chest.

Delin, Diar, and Niran pushed through the other Islanders, and Delin stopped, staring at the blood. The others looked aghast, but Delin only furrowed his brow. He said, “We were too late.”

Chime flinched at that accurate assessment of the situation. “Yes. And the Fell know you’re here. You have to run.”

There were shocked exclamations from the crew gathered around. Delin swore in the Islander language, then said, “We must abandon the ships and hide. We can’t outrun them.”

That was what the Fell would expect, and that was what Moon was counting on. “The one who betrayed us never saw how many ships you brought. Take the fastest, put everyone on it, and run for the coast.”

Delin’s expression cleared. “Excellent.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Chime said in relief. “When the Fell find the two empty ships they’ll search the forest for the crew, and not look for a third.”

Diar nodded agreement, obviously thankful to have an option that

didn't mean certain death. "It's worth the chance. We'll take the Dathea." She turned away, shouting to the others. The crew scrambled to obey, some running for the ladders to the holds.

Niran drew breath to speak, and Moon knew he was going to say it was a trick to keep the boats. Moon was prepared to throw him onto the Dathea; they didn't have time for an argument. But what Niran said was, "I'll stay behind. If the Fell don't destroy the ships, I can try to take one back and—"

Delin turned to him in exasperation. "The Fell will search for us, and when they find you they will force you to reveal where we've gone. Then they will know to look for a third ship, and they will catch us all. And you will be dead for nothing!"

"We can't lose these ships!" Niran folded his arms, as if determined not to budge. "We can't afford to, and you know it."

"Can you even make it work by yourself?" Chime asked, waving a hand toward the mast and the complicated array of ropes.

Delin answered, "It's possible, but difficult and dangerous. He wouldn't be able to use the sails, only the forward motion of the sustainer, so progress would be slow. And if a storm came up, he wouldn't be able to drop the anchors and crank the ship down to the ground or tie it off, so it would surely be damaged by the wind."

"It's worth the chance," Niran said, stubborn as a rock. "If I can return with one—"

Moon barely managed not to hiss in frustration. "The Fell will eat you alive, and that's if you're lucky. Keeping your people away from them is the only thing that matters."

The Islanders, carrying packs and bags brought up from below, climbed over the railings onto the Dathea, while several men stood ready to cut it free from the other two ships. Diar turned back to listen to the argument, and said, "He's right, Niran, we must leave. We can build new ships."

"Not if we can't pay our debts." Niran shook his head. "I have to stay behind. Once they see we aren't here, they may leave."

Chime stared at him incredulously. "The Fell will find you, and even if they didn't, you couldn't survive on the ground in this forest, not alone."

Niran still looked unmoved, so Moon added, "If you stay behind, you'll have to come with us." There was no way Niran was going to agree to that.

Niran said, "All right, if I have to."

Before Moon knew it, it was settled. Delin hurried off to make sure his books and writing materials were moved onto the other ship, Niran went with him, and Moon cursed his own stupidity. Chime snorted and said in Raksuran, "Pearl's going to love this. She doesn't like groundlings."

"Pearl doesn't like anything," Moon pointed out. Maybe the Fell wouldn't destroy the ships once they found the Islanders gone. Anything was possible.

As the crews readied the Dathea to leave, Diar arranged a few details for verisimilitude. They hung a long rope ladder from the railing of the Valendera that dangled all the way down to the ground, as if this was the route the crew had used to flee. A few sailors climbed down and ran around in the ferny growth below the ships, breaking branches, leaving tracks and trampled plants. They also dropped a hastily gathered bag of bread and dried fruit, left a torn head cloth behind on a thorn bush, and pitched a couple of sandals down the hill into the thicker trees. Moon thought it would work. The Fell weren't ground trackers; they hunted almost exclusively by air, and since their prey was nearly always groundlings trapped inside buildings or on the open streets of towns or cities, he thought they would be fooled. He hoped they would give up quickly when they couldn't find the Islanders in the surrounding jungle.

It all took only a few moments, and they were done by the time Niran returned. He wore a sturdy cloth jacket and carried a pack. "I'm ready," he said. He looked more determined and angry than nervous.

The Dathea was casting off, and Delin waved from the deck. "Take care!" he shouted. "Send word to us when you can!"

Moon waved back, watching as the ship lifted up, turned, and headed back toward the coast.

Sounding miserable, Chime said, "The boats were a good idea. It would have worked. We could have moved the whole court. If we'd been a day sooner—"

"Then the Fell would have attacked a day sooner, or come after us," Moon said. There was no point in what-ifs. He turned to Niran. "You're going to have to trust us."

"I know." Niran sounded like he would rather do anything but.

As they flew over the jungle toward the colony, Moon knew it must already be under attack. They were flying into the wind and the stench of Fell was laced all through it, mingled with blood and dirt

and the clean scent of the river.

They passed over a clearing, an area where a large fallen tree had flattened the other growth around it, and on impulse Moon circled back to land. Chime followed him, alighting on the piles of broken deadfall, setting Niran on his feet. Niran staggered sideways and sat down on a heavy branch, holding his head. "You fly much faster than I thought," he gasped.

Chime ignored him. "You smell it?" he asked Moon, twitching with worry. "We're too late."

Moon turned to Niran, speaking in Altanic. "The Fell are at our colony, we can scent them. I don't want them to see you; if they do it might make them look harder for the others."

Niran looked up at him, nodding ruefully. Even if he was still suspicious, he couldn't argue with this. "I'll wait here for you."

It was the best solution, but Moon didn't want to leave Niran on the ground alone. The Islander didn't know this territory, and if they couldn't return for him, he would be helplessly lost.

"Stay with him," he said to Chime. That solved a second problem. Moon had a bad feeling about what they would find at the colony, and maybe Chime didn't need to see it.

"What, you don't want me in the battle?" Chime said, uneasily.

That was part of it, too. "Just stay here," Moon said, and leapt into the air.

Past the next set of hills, the valley came within sight, and then the big step pyramid where it straddled the shallow river. Large, dark shapes flew in steady circles around it, like carrion birds over a dying grasseater—major kethel.

He had known they were too late, but it was still a sight to make his blood curdle.

Jade, Pearl, and the warriors stood on a bare hilltop, looking toward the colony. With them was a group of Arbora, a small group, only forty or so. They can't be the only survivors. Moon banked to land near Jade.

"Were you in time?" she asked, her eyes still on the kethel circling the colony.

"Yes." He didn't want to tell her the plan, not where others could hear. Moon looked over the Arbora, and his throat tightened. There was Bone, the old hunter with the scar around his neck, but he didn't see Petal, Bell, Rill, Knell or any of the others he knew. There were no

children, and they didn't look as if they had been in a fight. Most of them were hunters, still carrying rolled nets and short spears.

"Good." Jade hissed through her teeth. "Where's Chime?"

"I told him to wait for me. Do you know what happened?"

Sounding sick, Balm answered, "Bone and the others were in the forest when they saw the kethel fly in. They ran back to the river, but they met Braid and Salt and a few others who had been in the gardens, close enough to the colony to see what happened. They said that the first kethel brought smaller Fell, rulers or dakti, to the top of the colony. They started back inside to try to fight, but suddenly no one could shift. Knell was outside on the lower terrace. He shouted at them to run. Knell didn't follow. He must have stayed to try to gather the soldiers." Her voice was choked. "It doesn't make sense. They should have fought. Even if they were taken by surprise—"

"They couldn't fight, if they couldn't shift," Jade told her. "And the Fell would take hostages."

A few paces away Pearl stirred, her spines lifting uneasily. "Keeping them from shifting is a queen's power," she said. "How could the Fell have it?"

Jade shook her head slightly, the shocked stillness of her expression turning thoughtful. "They could have a queen. They could have the queen from Sky Copper. Stone said he never found her body, or any trace of her."

"Even a reigning queen couldn't keep the entire colony from shifting, not unless they were all together in the same room. It wouldn't affect the Arbora on the lower levels."

Balm's indrawn breath wasn't quite a hiss. "A ruler is coming this way."

A shape flew toward them. Behind him, Moon heard Root make a faint, frightened noise.

Jade said, with deadly emphasis, "Friend of yours, Pearl?"

Pearl's tail lashed once. "It's Kathras, the one that came to the court while you were wasting time on your pointless journey."

With a growl in his voice, Bone said, "You want to fight each other or face this thing?"

The ruler drew closer, riding the wind to land lightly only a short distance away. He folded leathery wings, and paced toward them through the tall grass, picking his way almost delicately.

“Kathras.” Pearl greeted it, calm and even. “How did you do this?”

“They wanted to join us,” he said. “We hold no one prisoner.” He spoke the Raksuran language, like the dakti at Sky Copper. Moon had never heard a Fell ruler speak anything but Altanic before. The rigid bone crest behind the ruler’s head didn’t betray emotion the way spines or frills did.

His gaze moved over them, resting for a moment on Moon. Moon felt the scales on his back itch, the urge to raise his spines, the nearly overpowering need to rip the creature apart.

Jade watched Kathras with predatory calm. She said, “Who was your spy?”

Kathras inclined his head toward her. “Your new consort.”

Moon hissed in pure surprise, then felt like a fool. He should have expected this; he was the obvious choice, the only newcomer to the court. He felt the others staring at him, but Jade just sighed.

“Predictable,” she said, and added acidly, “I’m surprised you didn’t say it was me.”

Pearl ignored it all, her attention focused only on the ruler. “What do you want from us, Kathras?”

The cold eyes turned back to Pearl. “We have what we want.”

“Arbora, sterile Aeriast. That’s not what you want,” Pearl said. Her voice took on a different tone, warm and low. She eased forward, focused on Kathras, and Moon felt intense heat brush past him, even though she was more than six paces away. It was a faint echo of the connection he had felt when he had first seen Pearl. She was trying to use it on Kathras, trying to pull him in, seduce him, the way she had Moon.

Pearl said, “You want a queen. You need a queen. Let the others in the colony leave, and you’ll have one.”

Kathras cocked his head. “They don’t want to leave. Come into our colony. You will see that all is well.”

Drift stirred, uncertain. “If one of us has to go—”

“No.” Jade cut him off, not taking her gaze away from the ruler. “If you go inside, you won’t be able to shift, and they’ll have you, too.”

Drift shook his head, helpless, anguished. “How do we know?”

“It’s a trick, a Fell trick. It’s what they do,” Balm added in a hiss.

“You think the others want to be trapped in there with them?”

“Drift, be quiet,” Pearl said. Her eyes were still on Kathras. “Your plan won’t work without a queen. You know you need me. Let the others go.”

“When we seek a Raksuran queen,” Kathras said, his fangs showing, “we will seek one of strong mind and body, fertile, and not so easily fooled.”

Pearl lunged at Kathras, but he darted backward, avoiding her claws by a hairsbreadth. As if nothing had happened, he said, “Come whenever you wish. You will all be welcomed.” Then he turned and leapt back into the air.

The warriors and hunters snarled. River crouched to launch himself after Kathras, but Jade said sharply, “No, idiot. We can’t fight them now.”

“She’s right.” Pearl watched Kathras fly away. She breathed as hard as if she had just been in a fight. “They can threaten to kill the clutches and fledglings, or just send a few kethel against us.

“We need to go, before they come after us.”

Chapter Eleven

The hunters made a sling big enough for Stone's Raksuran form, and Moon and several Aeriats and Arbora carried him out of the temple and into the deep forest. They stayed on the ground, which made the going slow and difficult, but would make it harder for the Fell to track them. Two hunters followed the group, covering any sign of their passage, and another led the way, picking the best route through the undergrowth.

Dim and green, the failing light filtered through the heavy fronds forming the forest canopy, and the ground was thick with moss and tall ferns. The spiral trees curved up, more than a hundred paces high, their roots taller than Moon's head. It was quiet except for the distant birdcalls, the treelings chattering at each other. The others had all gone ahead to make a blind, something else the hunters were expert at.

Stone was still unconscious, his breathing almost too slow to detect. His wounds had stopped bleeding, but Flower had nothing with her, no medicines or even simples to help him.

Root, on the opposite side of the sling towards the back, stumbled on something and it jostled Stone. Moon hissed randomly at all of them. Stone being hurt had created a cold lump of fear in Moon's chest that had taken him by surprise. It wasn't just losing his best ally, or that Stone had seemed indestructible. Moon might not have been Stone's first choice to bring back to the court, but Stone had plenty of time to lose him along the way to Indigo Cloud if he had wanted to. It was a shock to realize just how much it meant that he hadn't.

"He'll be all right," Flower said, though Moon hadn't asked. She picked her way along beside him in her groundling form. "He'll heal faster while he sleeps like this."

"How long before he can shift?" If Stone shifted into groundling now, his wounds would kill him instantly.

"Several days, at least." She added, "We're going to need your help."

He glanced down to see her watching him intently. "I said I'd stay

until you moved the court.”

Moon was getting tired of having to repeat that promise. He had come here knowing he would have to fight Fell at some point, but that wasn't what frightened him. It was the other Raksura—they frightened him, confused him, made him feel threatened in vague ways he couldn't articulate even to himself. “Nothing's changed.”

“That's good to know. But we're also going to need your help with Pearl and Jade.” Flower's expression suggested that what she was about to say left a bad taste in her mouth. “If you could try not to provoke anything between them. There's a time for Jade to challenge Pearl's reign, but this isn't it.”

“That's funny.” It wasn't funny, though Moon was willing to admit to a certain bitter amusement. “Because I'm pretty certain Stone brought me here to do exactly that.”

“We did have something like that in mind,” Flower admitted. “And I, at least, was foolish enough to think that Pearl might be ready to end her reign and give way to Jade, once she was made to see that Jade was ready. That may be one of the reasons why she didn't tell me what the Fell wanted.” Her tone turned rueful. “What a burden that must have been on her. And I just thought she was ill.” She looked up at him again. “We didn't expect Pearl to want you, but then Stone and I are old enough to be long past that sort of thing. If the court had a clutch of young consorts, if Pearl was still used to having them around, your sudden arrival wouldn't have had that effect on her.”

She had that wrong. Moon found it highly unlikely that Pearl wanted him for anything other than dinner. And if they had a clutch of consorts, he wouldn't be here. He would be picked-over, vargitchewed bones. But arguing about it wouldn't help, and there was something else he wanted to know.

“Did you really have a vision that I should go warn the groundlings?”

“I don't make visions up, Moon,” Flower said with some irritation. After a moment, she shook her head. “I'm not sure it was about letting you go to warn the groundlings. Visions aren't that specific, even mine.”

Ahead, their Arbora guide swung down from a tree and motioned anxiously for them to follow. “It's this way.”

As they wound through the trees, Moon was glad of the guide. The blind was hard to make out, even this close. The Arbora had used a low spot overhung by trees, and weaved deadfall branches and fresh

greenery to make a roof and walls. They had moved rocks, and used large sections of the moss carpet, until the whole thing looked like a hillock buried in the forest.

Niran helped two female Arbora gather greenery for more concealment. He looked up as they approached, staring at Stone with wary curiosity.

The waiting hunters lifted a section of brush, and Moon and the others carried Stone into the shadowy interior. Flower slipped in ahead of them and, after some rustling, a fall of moss hanging from the roof branches started to glow, giving them enough light to set the sling down. The ground had been carefully cleared, scraped down to bare dirt. The Arbora had methodically removed the top layer of moss and ferns, and used it to conceal the roof of the blind.

The Arbora pulled the open section back into place, restoring it with quick adjustments and repairs to the dislodged greenery. The only light was the dim white glow of the spelled moss. Moon knelt beside Stone's head, making sure he was still breathing. He thought he saw the dark eyelid shiver, but couldn't be sure.

Flower crouched beside him and tugged at his arm. "Come on, the others are making plans. We need to be there."

Moon didn't think Pearl and her supporters would feel that he needed to be there at all, but he had thought of something he needed to tell them. He hesitated. "Who'll stay with him?"

"Blossom and Bead." She nodded to the two female Arbora who were showing Niran how to wind greenery into the blind. Bead was young, but Blossom showed some signs of age, with threads of gray in her dark hair. "The only teachers to escape. And we'll put the older hunters in here. They're experienced at tending the wounded."

Moon followed her reluctantly.

The blind already had partitions, screens of woven fronds, dividing it into chambers. As Flower led the way through, Moon's spines kept catching on the woven branches and vines, so he shifted to groundling.

Somewhere nearby, Chime said impatiently, "No, that won't work. If we try to get inside the colony, we'll be caught by the same power that's keeping the others from shifting."

Balm's voice was tense with frustration. "Even if we could shift once we were inside, there's just not enough of us to fight all those Fell. We need help."

Flower stepped through an opening small enough that Moon had

to duck to follow her. This part of the blind was still partially open to the outside and braced against the rough gray wall of a plume tree's trunk. Besides Chime and Balm, Jade, Pearl, Bone, and River sat on the bare ground. The others were in groundling form, and Jade and Pearl had shifted to Arbora. Pearl sat back against the wide column of a root, her body tense, her tail wrapped around her feet. Her usually brilliant blue and gold scales seemed dimmed, muted. Jade sat across from her, and Moon was struck by the sight of her face in profile, her long jaw tight with tension, her eyes narrowed. She sat with her arms propped on her knees, every muscle coiled with seething frustration. She wanted to challenge Pearl. That was obvious to him, and had to be obvious to everyone here. But she knew this was no time or place for it. The court had to be united under one queen and Pearl was it, whether they liked it or not.

Jade looked up and their eyes met. Moon was caught for an instant, then managed to look away. After a moment, she asked, "How is Stone?"

"Still the same." Flower stepped around to sit next to Chime, tugging her skirt over her moss-stained feet. "We just need to keep him still and warm, until he heals."

Moon sat next to Flower, hoping Pearl would just pretend he didn't exist. But she watched him, her blue eyes cold. With an ironic air, she said, "So tell us. How did the Fell know you were new to the court?"

Moon considered pointing out that one of Pearl's warrior friends who was a Fell spy could have reported it. Instead he said, "They saw me at Sky Copper, with Stone. A ruler spoke through one of the dakti."

Bone nodded. "Stone told us of that. These must be the same rulers that destroyed Sky Copper, not that there was much doubt about it."

"And we know the Fell share memories." Flower leaned forward, flattening her hands on the ground. "The ability seems to come from the way they breed. There are only a few females, progenitors, who mate with the rulers. Rulers born of the same progenitor have a close connection to each other. They can speak through each other, see through each other's eyes." She looked at Moon, lifting her pale brows. "The rulers are said to be able to influence some groundlings. Have you seen that before?"

"Yes." Moon rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. He had seen it from far too close. "Do you think that's what this ruler did to Branch?"

Flower started to answer, then flicked a look at Pearl. "Maybe."

River snarled, a full-throated sound despite his groundling form. "It wasn't Branch."

That was actually what Moon was most afraid of. He told River, "If it wasn't him, then whoever it was is still with us."

River tilted his head, leaning forward. "The Fell said it was you."

Bone snorted. "The Fell said, 'Warrior, listening to anything the Fell say will get you killed.'"

Moon pointedly turned to Jade, hoping River would go for his throat and give Moon the excuse to kill him.

"The poison I told you about, that the Cordans gave me—it kept me from shifting until it wore off. They said it was for Fell. Have you ever heard of anything like that?"

"No." Jade looked startled. "You think this poison is how the Fell kept the court from shifting?"

"Maybe. The hunters said Knell called a warning. When the Cordans gave it to me, I didn't even remember falling unconscious." Moon couldn't think of a way that the poison could be spread through water or air that wouldn't have affected the Arbora working just outside the colony as well. "Stone said he had never heard of it either."

"You brought a groundling here," River said, making it sound like an accusation. "Does he know of this mythical poison?"

Moon had to let a little of his derision show. "All groundlings don't know each other."

"We can ask," Jade cut across River's reply. "But it's doubtful. When I spoke to the Islanders' leader, the only defense they seemed to have against the Fell was the distance the islands lay from shore."

Balm watched Moon carefully. "Why did these Cordans poison you?"

Well, somebody would have to ask. Moon shrugged, as if it barely mattered. "One of them saw me shift. She thought I was a Fell."

"There's a coincidence," River put in sourly.

Chime leaned forward. "To untutored groundlings, our consorts look like Fell rulers." He added, pointedly, to River, "You may not have realized this, since you aren't actually a consort, despite your sleeping habits."

"Chime." Balm reached over and caught his wrist, giving him a

meaningful look. Chime pressed his lips together and sat back reluctantly. Bone passed a hand over his face and looked away. Jade just lifted a brow.

River ignored it all, looking at Pearl. "He could be lying. It could be as the Fell ruler said."

Moon was tired of hearing it at this point. "Of course it could. That's why the Fell said it."

River started to reply, but with a growl in her voice, Pearl said, "That's enough."

River looked as if he might argue, but after a moment, subsided uneasily.

Jade drew a claw through the dirt. "I'm wondering, if the Fell had this power to stop an entire colony from shifting, why haven't they used it before now? Raksura have fought Fell off and on since the Three Worlds first turned. Weakened courts have always had to be wary of attacks, but nothing in our histories has ever mentioned anything like this."

"Because it must be something new," Flower said, quietly.

"But they didn't try to use it on us at the temple," Balm said, with a glance at Jade. "So whatever it is, maybe there's only one of it?"

Pearl eyed Flower. "Too bad there was no warning of this new thing. No visions, no augury..."

Yes, that's helpful, Moon thought. Let's share out the blame. But with effort he managed to keep his mouth shut.

Flower's attention appeared to be on her toes, peeping out from under the ragged hem of her skirt. "For the past turn, my augury has said to follow Stone, to leave the colony and seek another to the west." She lifted her head and deliberately met Pearl's gaze. "Too bad no one listened."

The silence grew tight as wire, then Pearl looked away, her lips peeled back in a grimace. "I did listen. I didn't heed. That's on my head."

After a moment, Bone stirred. He said, bleakly, "We have a scatter of Arbora and a bare handful of Aeriats, to go against an entire flight of Fell who can keep us from shifting. If we attack as we are, we'll die." He looked from Pearl to Jade. "What about sending to another court for help?"

Jade flicked her claws. "It's probably not worth asking Star Aster, and they're the largest court we have contact with." She took a deep

breath. "Sky Copper was our only close ally."

Bone grunted in agreement, but added, "We have blood relations with Wind Sun and Mist Silver."

Pearl's eyes went hooded. "Both are small, and too far away."

With more than a trace of irony, Jade said, "And both are unlikely to want to help us, especially Wind Sun."

Pearl's voice was icy. "Dust is second consort to a reigning queen. He has nothing to complain of."

Jade bared her teeth in something that wasn't a smile. "And if we ask Wind Sun's queen for warriors, whose voice will she give weight to: the consort who fathered two of her clutches or the queen who forced him out of his birthcourt for no reason?"

Pearl avoided her gaze, and said tightly, "I knew he would find a place there."

Jade persisted, "He was young and inexperienced and not as sure of that as you were. Now when we could use the help—"

With a hint of a growl in his voice, Bone interrupted, "You've made your point, Jade."

Jade ruffled her spines, but subsided.

After an uncomfortable moment, Pearl said, "But I think Wind Sun would give us refuge for the Arbora and the warriors, if asked."

Everyone went still, startled. Then Flower said slowly, "You think it's come to that?"

That it's come to giving up, Moon thought. Going away and leaving the Raksura trapped in the colony with the Fell, the Arbora and warriors, the clutches of babies, the fledglings. Don't, he wanted to say, somebody will think of something. Give it time. But he knew he couldn't say it in any way that wouldn't antagonize Pearl.

Pearl hesitated, then shook her head. "Not yet. Not until we know if the Fell are lying, if the others are already dead."

It was deep twilight when Moon left the blind. Two of the warriors, Drift and Coil, were on watch up in the trees, along with several hunters on the ground, but he wanted to take a look around the area himself. He shifted but didn't take to the air, walking among the ferns, tasting the breeze. He passed Root and Song under some tree roots, wrapped together while Root sobbed quietly on her shoulder. He must be mourning Branch, and the others trapped in the colony. Moon winced in sympathy, but didn't pause.

He made his way through the undergrowth, while the birdcalls and buzz of insects faded away with the green-tinged light. He stepped over a group of small, bright-colored lumps that looked like mushrooms. They all stood up and ran away on stubby little legs.

They had talked about a plan for one of the young hunters to try to get in through the openings under the colony's platform, where the structure crossed the river. That would at least tell them if the others still lived. If the hunter could bring someone out, or get some idea of what had stopped the court from shifting to fight or escape, it would be even more useful. Of course, if the young hunter vanished into the colony and never came back, it would tell them nothing, and they would lose yet another Arbora.

As Moon circled around to the west, he was conscious of the warriors up in the trees, of Drift's gaze following him, resentful and suspicious. Moon passed a hunter crouched among tree roots, the dark brown of his scales fading to invisibility against the wood. The hunter made a clicking noise in his throat. Moon nodded to him, not sure how to respond. A few steps later, a slight deliberate swish against the undergrowth told Moon another hunter was nearby. Then Bone stepped out of the ferns.

Bone walked along with Moon for a few paces. He looked up into the trees and said, deliberately, "We need everyone. Can't waste our blood fighting among ourselves."

Up in the branches, Drift tried to stare Bone down, failed, and retreated with a resentful hiss. Moon wouldn't want to fight Bone either, at least on the ground; though short, he was twice the width of the other Arbora and his throat scar showed just how tough he was.

"Can't argue with that," Moon said dryly.

Bone walked with Moon most of the way around the area then, with a grunt of acknowledgement, split off to rejoin the other hunters. Heading back toward the blind, Moon caught Jade's scent, and found her waiting impatiently just past a stand of reed-trees.

"You need a bath," she said, and motioned for him to follow her.

Moon had dried kethel blood on his scales, as well as the accumulated sweat and dirt of his groundling form, but he was sure there was a little more to her request than that. He followed her down the slope of the hill, through the trees to a little spring. Barely three paces wide and probably not more than knee deep, it cut through the forest floor among mossy rocks and waterweeds. Flower sat on the bank, leaning over the water to wash out a shirt.

Jade sat down near her, and Moon stepped past them into the stream. He scooped up the cool water and scrubbed it against his scales, aware someone else was nearby. Then leaves whispered overhead and Pearl climbed down the trunk of the nearest tree like a great gold insect, moving deliberately, in near silence.

She took a seat on the bank and coiled herself up. Moon gauged the distance between them and decided he was safe enough for the moment. Jade said softly, "We've agreed that we need to keep this conversation away from the others. We wanted to talk more about the poison."

Moon nodded. It might mean Pearl wasn't as sure of River and her other warriors as she pretended, or that she suspected they were somehow inadvertently betraying her. This way, it would at least narrow the suspects down to... Me, Moon realized. Well, the solution had the virtue of being multi-purpose. It lessened the chances that the Fell would find out about any plan involving the poison, and it gave Pearl the opportunity to get rid of him, both at once.

"I asked Niran about the poison," Flower said, frowning as she wrung water out of the cloth. "He had never heard of it. He said their exploring ships are always on the look out for such things, but that they haven't gone toward the far east for generations."

Flicking her tail in agitation, Jade asked Moon, "Did it work on all the Fell, rulers as well as dakti and kethel?"

"I don't know." Moon crouched down to splash water on his face, tipping his head back to let it trickle down through his spines and frills. He was too conscious of just how much he didn't know about the poison. "I didn't even know they had it until they used it on me."

Pearl's expression was opaque. "You said the Fell destroyed their lands. How well could this poison have worked?"

But Flower shook her head. "It depends on when they first started using it. Were the Fell still pursuing them?"

"Not while I was there." Moon hesitated, dripping, trying to remember the stories the Cordans had told about Kiaspur and the Fell attacks. "They had to abandon their cities, but the Fell didn't follow the refugees."

"Fell don't like to give up on prey, as we well know." Flower sat back to add the shirt to a pile of wet clothes on the bank. "If these groundlings didn't discover the poison themselves until the Fell had destroyed most of their territory, it may be what let them escape."

Jade leaned forward, her face intent, looking from Flower to

Pearl. "We could put it into the river, so it's drawn up into the colony's water supply. Then we could go through and kill all the Fell."

Flower asked Moon, "I don't suppose you know how to make it?"

"No. If I brought some to you, could you make it?"

"I'd be able to tell what was in it. It just depends if we can get the ingredients." Flower squeezed the water out of her own skirt. "How far away is this place?"

"Stone and I flew from there in nine days, but he carried me the last day." Moon closed his eyes, trying to call up an image of the map they had looked at when they planned the journey to the Yellow Sea. On the way to Indigo Cloud, he and Stone had cut sharply north to stop at Sky Copper. A more direct route would save some time, avoiding the plains and taking them straight back to the Cordans' valley. Call it eleven days. "I can go there and bring some back."

Flower bit her lip, and said to Pearl, "This fits the vision I had, better than sending him to warn the groundlings. I think we have to do this."

Pearl said skeptically, "We're supposed to trust him to come back with this poison? How do we know he won't take the opportunity to run away?"

Moon controlled a hiss. "You don't. You just have to trust me."

Pearl turned her head to regard him coldly. "You haven't earned our trust."

Moon set his jaw. "You're the one who told me to leave."

Flower lifted a brow, and said pointedly, "Queens have a right to change their minds."

Pearl fixed an angry glare on Flower.

Moon hissed in annoyance. This was pointless. He would have liked to take Chime, both for the company on the journey and the help when it came time to figure out how to get the poison from the Cordans, but that wasn't possible. He would be flying at his fastest pace, and none of the warriors could keep up with him. "If I take a warrior, it would make the trip nearly twice as long."

Flower said, "But it would be safer to send someone with you. If you fail just because you needed another pair of hands—"

"Then we won't send him alone," Jade said, tense and frustrated. "I'll go with him."

From what Stone had said, a queen should easily be able to keep

up with a consort. But her offer still gave Moon pause. He wondered if she suspected him of wanting to run away, or if the Fell Kathras' accusation had had more effect on her than it had seemed.

Pearl gave her a withering look. "So we should send the only other queen away?"

Jade bared her fangs in a grimace. "If we don't drive out the Fell and free the others, there's no court for either of us to be queen of. And yes, you mean to ask Wind Sun for help, but we both know how unlikely it is that they'll answer." She settled back on the bank, coiling her tail around, and added almost wearily, "I'm the sister queen. It's my task."

Pearl hissed out a breath, turning away. After a long moment, she said, "Our only other choice is to attack the colony now and die, or be caught like the rest of the court. That's what the Fell want us to do." She looked at Jade. "Go with him."

After they had talked out all the details, Moon crawled under some tree roots near the blind and shifted to groundling to try to sleep for a while. There weren't any more preparations to make. Flower had collected a pack for them containing a few supplies donated by the hunters, but all the collection amounted to was some fruit and dried meat, flints, and a couple of blankets. He was too jumpy to get much rest, and woke instantly when he sensed someone approach.

It was still dark, though he could feel dawn gathering on the horizon. It was nearly time to leave. He eased out of the roots and made out Jade's distinctive shape stepping silently through the moss and leaf loam. She paused to whisper, "I'll tell Flower we're leaving."

"I'll be here," he told her.

Jade vanished into the dark, and Moon made his way to the blind, easing between the bundles of brush.

The small knot of glow moss strung from the roof showed him Stone's still shape, the slow, deep rasp of his breath the only sign of life. Chime, several hunters, and the two teachers slept in here. Niran was against the far wall, wrapped in a blanket and snoring quietly. Fortunately, Chime was in the outer row of bodies, and Moon didn't have to step over anybody to get to him.

When Moon squeezed his shoulder, Chime snapped awake immediately, blinking nervously up at him. Moon put a hand over his mouth before he could speak, and nodded for Chime to follow him outside.

Some of the Arbora stirred sleepily, but no one sat up as they

slipped out between the walls of brush. Picking his way through the dark, Moon found his hollow in the tree roots again, sat, and drew Chime down next to him. It was too dark to make out expressions, but maybe that was a good thing.

Moon knew the sentries were too far away to hear, but he still kept his voice to a low whisper.

“I need you to look after Niran. Make sure he has food he can eat and that, if you have to move, he’s not left behind.”

“I will, I’ll make certain.” Chime hesitated, his shoulder brushing against Moon’s as he twitched uneasily. “There’s been whispering that you and Jade are going to go somewhere, to get help. If that’s not it, don’t tell me. Then I can’t be made to... If the Fell catch us...”

“The Fell aren’t good ground trackers. They won’t find you here.” Moon hoped that was true, but showing doubt to Chime wouldn’t help anything.

Chime slumped a little. “That’s what Pearl is saying.”

“She’s not always wrong,” Moon admitted, trying not to sound sour about it.

“We can hope.” Chime took a sharp breath. Then he leaned close, and Moon felt warm breath and a sharp nip under his ear. Chime whispered, “Be careful,” and scrambled away.

Moon listened to him make his way back to the blind. This has to work, he thought. It has to.

Chapter Twelve

Moon and Jade left before dawn broke and flew through the day like arrows.

They flew over the jungle, then hills, then the edge of the grass plains, heading toward the mountains. They pushed themselves hard, stopping only briefly to rest, and at the end of each day they were too exhausted to talk about anything except whose turn it was to hunt. Moon thought that was probably a large factor in how well they were getting along.

They were one day into the mountains when Moon started to have some concern about their route. They settled for the night on a ledge on a gentle slope, sheltered by trees made of hundreds of vines, winding around themselves to form tall straggly bundles.

Moon and Stone had come through these ranges at a different point, and the cold, the strong winds and the lack of game had made it a rough crossing. Now the view of the terrain that lay before them was nothing but endless, barren slopes, snow-capped peaks, and sharp cliffs. This way was more direct, but Moon thought that maybe they should have taken an extra day and entered the mountains further south, that maybe Stone had chosen that route for a reason. But it was too late now.

He was about to tell Jade his concerns when she lifted her head, tasting the air. “Fell.” She snarled. “How are they following us? This is ridiculous.”

Moon stood and took a deep breath, holding it to examine the scents. She was right, not that he had doubted; mixed in with rock, damp, the rank odor of the predators that prowled the nearby canyon, was the distinctive taint of Fell. He suppressed a growl, since Jade was doing enough of that for both of them. “They must have seen or scented us when we left the valley.”

Except that didn’t seem possible. The Fell shouldn’t be able to track them by scent; they were flying downwind. And no one could have betrayed them. The others hadn’t seen them leave, and Flower and Pearl didn’t even know which way the Cordans’ settlement lay.

Jade tapped her claws on the rock. "Or..." She grimaced. "The Fell seemed to have a queen's power over the court. They couldn't shift to fight or run. This is like a mentor's power, the power to point the Fell in the right direction to find us, to see us in visions."

That idea made Moon's skin crawl. But he didn't want to give up. For one thing, he still hadn't thought of any better way to attack the Fell in the colony than the poison. And it wasn't just the Indigo Cloud court that needed saving. He thought about all the groundlings he had met over the turns, all the cities and settlements. The Fell had already caused enough death and destruction. If they were actually getting worse, somehow becoming more powerful, he couldn't imagine what that would be like. "We're close. Once we get past the mountains, we're there."

"Yes, I think we should go on." Jade rolled her shoulders and settled her frills. "Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the Fell just saw us leave, and have been lucky enough to track us. If that's so, we should be able to lose them in the mountain currents."

Moon hoped she was right.

They were only halfway through the mountains when the sky turned against them. They had to fight the wind, and the clouds closed in to weep cold rain and ice. Moon thought this was probably the reason Stone had taken the more southern route. Their only hope was that the Fell following them was something less than a major kethel. If that were the case, then it would be just as affected as they were.

After two more days fighting the cold and the wet, they were both exhausted. Then in the late afternoon, Moon caught the hint of wood smoke, and a more acrid scent of hot metal, as if there was a large working forge somewhere upwind. On impulse he followed it. The slopes below them were all barren rock, and wood smoke meant trees and a sheltered valley that might give them some relief for the night.

It was nearly evening when the smoke led them over a pass, and Moon was startled to see the source. Between two peaks, ringed by crags and cliffs, was a groundling city.

It was like a small mountain itself, but made of metal as well as stone, built on a giant circular plateau that seemed suspended in the pass. The buildings were made of heaps of raw stone, forming odd-sized towers, supported by discolored metal beams. In the failing daylight, lamps glittered from windows, and smoke and white steam drifted up from hundreds of chimneys. Moon could make out the

shapes of groundlings moving in the narrow streets, but he thought his eyes betrayed him because the city, the whole giant plateau, seemed to be slowly turning.

Moon cut in toward the nearest crag and landed on a ledge where he could get a good view. From this angle, he could see that the plateau beneath the city was probably two or three hundred paces tall, and the edge was studded by thick, heavy pillars, like the spokes of a wheel. Water rushed out from under it, a great torrent falling down to a narrow lake below. The platform wasn't a natural plateau but a giant wheel lying on its side, turned by the force of the water. That's new, Moon thought, impressed with the groundlings' ingenuity.

Jade landed next to him, breathing hard from the icy wind.

"What is this place?" She leaned forward, squinting. "And why is it moving?"

Moon shook his head. "I don't know. I've never heard of it."

The city lay right in the path of a pass, and a wide road led up to it, carved out of the rocky side of the cliff. The bulk of the city kept Moon from seeing exactly how the road reached the platform, but there must be some sort of bridge or stair. Several parties of groundlings made their way up the road, probably trying to reach the city before nightfall. A dark shape moving along resolved itself into a blocky, square wagon drawn by furry draughtbeasts, not unlike the ones the Sericans had used to travel the grass plains. Then Moon caught a flash of dark blue from the wagon box and thought they must be Sericans, or a race very similar.

Despite its odd situation, every indication suggested this was a trading city, where travelers felt safe taking shelter. Moon let his breath out in frustration, his bones aching from the damp cold. If they could go down there, buy food and a place to sleep for the night, they might be able to fly far enough to make it out of the mountains and into the warmer valleys by evening tomorrow. But Jade could only shift to Arbora, not groundling like Moon and the others. He stared at her, realizing, "You don't look like a Fell."

She eyed him. "Thank you."

"I mean, it's me that's the problem." Moon's black scales made him resemble a Fell too closely for groundling comfort. Jade's scales were blue and gray, and in her Arbora form, without her wings and most of her spines, she would just look like a groundling from another race. Granted, most groundlings didn't have scales and tails, but at least no one could point and say, "Fell." All she had to do was not shift where anyone could see her. He took her hand, looking at her

rings. "Would you trade one of these for food and a warm place to sleep tonight?"

Her brow furrowed in surprise. "I'd love to. Is that possible?"

Moon looked down at the city again. "Probably."

They waited until night filled the valley before they flew down to land among the rocky outcrops below the road. Moon shifted to groundling and Jade to Arbora, and they walked up the steep path, the lights of the city guiding them in.

The ice-laden wind was biting and the frozen mud and loose rock crunched underfoot. Moon carried their pack, and Jade wore a blanket as a wrap, tied at her shoulder. Some groundlings had nudity taboos, some didn't, but wearing nothing in this weather would attract unwanted attention. He had also had her take off all her jewelry, her rings, bracelets, and belt, and bury it in the bottom of the pack, except for the amethyst ring they meant to trade. There was no point in attracting trouble.

As the road curved around, they passed metal stands supporting torches that hissed and steamed from the ice in the air, the warm light illuminating the road ahead. Drawing closer to the edge of the platform, Moon heard the massive creak of gears, audible even over the rush of the waterfall below. The pillars supporting the city platform were huge, but mostly lost in shadow. Moon and Jade were too far below it to see much of the city itself, except for the looming columns of rock towers. Once they climbed high enough, Moon could see that the road continued on through the pass, disappearing into the dark. But at the top of the slope, a wide metal bridge, supported with stone columns, crossed a narrow gorge to the platform.

It didn't go all the way across; it stopped just before the edge of the platform, which was protected by a stone and metal wall. Apparently you had to wait until the platform rotated around to an opening in the wall before you could cross over to the city. A group of groundlings waited on the bridge. A man at the end acted as gatekeeper.

The groundlings were all bundled up in furred hides or heavy knitted cloth, waiting with varying degrees of impatience or resignation for the next gate to come around. They were tall people, heavily built, with frizzy gray-brown hair not much distinguishable from their fur hoods and cloaks. They also had heavy tusks or horns curving down below their chins.

The bridge was wide and spacious, so Moon walked out onto it. Jade followed him. It was sheltered from the wind, though not from

the icy drizzle. The torch-stands lit the rocky gorge below, the silver-gray curtain of water tumbling down. The other travelers huddled in on themselves against the cold and didn't take much notice of the new arrivals.

Moon walked up to stand beside the gatekeeper to get a better look. The platform moved with grating slowness, but he saw an opening in the outer wall rotating toward them. There must be many openings, otherwise the city's platform wouldn't be accessible for half the night. The gatekeeper, bundled against the cold, waited patiently. Moon had to ask, "The water makes it turn?"

Jade leaned into listen as the man, with the air of replying by rote, said, "There's a special sort of rock in this pass. The water turns the wheels, grinding the rock, and the movement makes the rock give off heat, and the heat is used to make steam." Like most of the others, he had smooth brown skin, deep-set eyes, a heavy forehead ridge, and bushy brows. His tusks were very white, yellowed only on the ends. He turned toward them and did a slightly startled double-take at their appearance. But they must not have seemed too out of the ordinary, because he added, again by rote, "To find the caravanserai, follow the outer ring around to the wagon path, then head in toward the center of the city. It's the widest path. You can't miss it."

"Thank you," Jade told him. She added, in Raksuran to Moon, "What's a caravanserai?"

"A place we can pay to stay the night," Moon told her absently. This close to the city, he was beginning to feel jumpy. He had been around Raksura long enough to fall into their habits: shifting whenever he felt like it, hissing when he was startled or angry. He hoped it hadn't hurt his ability to pretend to be a groundling.

They waited, and finally the opening in the outer ring grated into place, matching platforms with the bridge. The keeper opened the gate, saying, "Hurry now, step carefully!" and everyone moved across.

Moon and Jade followed the others. The outer ring was just inside the platform wall, a wide corridor along the edge of the city paved with stone and metal squares. Narrow streets led off into the interior, all lined with the tall rock buildings supported by metal girders, discolored with rust. More torch-stands lit the streets. The buildings had little round windows sealed with thin hide or what might be paper. Firelight shined through, giving the houses a lively look even though most of the inhabitants must be huddled inside against the cold. Moon caught enticing scents of cooked meat and boiled roots as they walked past.

The other travelers all took the narrower streets, but none seemed to be the wagon path the gatekeeper had described. Finally Moon spotted it, a wide opening more than large enough for the big Serican wagon he had seen earlier.

As they turned down the street, Moon saw a number of people ahead gathered around a doorway, a cave-like opening into a dim, smoky chamber. As they reached it, Moon paused, catching a glimpse inside. A groundling was sprawled on the floor, another was drinking from a ceramic bottle, and more forms were lost in the dimness. "In there?" Jade asked, eyeing the place doubtfully. "It stinks."

It did stink, of some kind of drugged smoke, and it looked like it was a place for locals. "No, not there."

As they moved on, the street got busier, with more lighted doorways, more groundlings moving from one place to the other, talking and laughing. Moon and Jade weren't the only strangers. Almost everyone was bundled up against the cold, but Moon caught sight of groundlings with bright green skin, and a whole group whose heavy fur coverings appeared to be at least partially attached to their bodies.

A few people glanced at them as they passed, but the looks seemed more curious than hostile. Music came from the windows above them, drums and something that made a high-pitched wailing noise. As they passed some of the doorways Moon felt rushes of warm, steamy air, heady promises of comfort, if the gatekeeper was right about the caravanserai.

Then at the next bend, a big, tusked groundling lurched out in front of them. Thinking it was an accident, Moon moved to step around him. But the man shoved forward, barring his way.

Moon didn't flinch, just met the man's belligerent gaze and snarled under his breath. The man's tusks had a complicated design carved into them, the shallow grooves filled in with black ink, and his fur coat gave off a smoky, sweet stink. More groundlings gathered around the nearest doorway, watching with suppressed laughter.

The man faltered when Moon didn't give way, then glared and rocked forward, lifting a hand.

Jade stepped forward and caught his arm, effortlessly shoving him back. Her fangs were slightly bared, just the tips showing over lips curled with contempt. The groundling stumbled, staring blankly, bewildered by her strength. Moon snorted, partly in bitter amusement; the groundling would have been even more startled if she had ripped his guts out. Before anything else could happen, Moon caught Jade's

wrist, shouldered past the groundling, and tugged her after him.

No one followed. Tracking the movement behind them, Moon heard laughter and some imprecations, but most of it seemed to be directed at the groundling man for being stupid enough to test strange travelers.

Jade bristled and walked like she wanted a fight. After a moment, she rolled her shoulders, making her spines and frills relax. Reluctantly, she asked, "Was that the wrong thing to do?"

Moon shrugged a little. "Maybe, maybe not." It was always hard to tell if it was better to meet a challenge like that and fight, or give way. "We won't be staying long enough to find out."

The street widened out into a round plaza, with more passages leading off between the tall rock towers. The Serican wagon stood parked to one side, a few Sericans in heavy embroidered coats wearily unloading it, their indigo skin and dark hair catching reflections from the firelight. The furry draughtbeasts had been released from their harnesses and lay beside the wagon in a comfortable huddle. One of them lifted its massive head, and the beady eyes half-buried in fur glared warily at Moon and Jade.

The Sericans carried bags and bales through a low doorway into the biggest building, a rambling structure with odd corners and overhangs, at least four levels tall. It had several open doors, and many windows flickering with light.

Tattered flags hung outside the main door, the same system Moon had seen used in Viridian Coast trading cities. The red one meant provisions were sold here, the blue that there was space for travelers to sleep, and the others all had various meanings for the storage of wagons, draft animals, and whether trade was done there. Moon fell in behind one of the Sericans, following him under the heavy doorway and down a corridor that was angled to keep out the wind. The air was heavy with the scent of cooked meat, the sounds of talking and laughter. Then they walked into a wave of steamy warmth. Behind Moon, Jade hissed in relief.

The corridor widened into a foyer, one passage angling off to a room where Moon heard someone moving barrels around, and the other heading further in. Moon followed it as it wound deeper into the building, past little rooms or cubbies, each furnished with hide rugs and cushions. A variety of people sat in them, talking, or eating and drinking from copper dishes. Many were the locals with the bushy hair and tusks, but Moon saw more Sericans, some short groundlings with small brown horns peeking out from under their hooded jackets,

and the people with the bright green skin.

Moon made his way along, hoping to find a proprietor somewhere, the ice melting in his hair and dripping coldly down the back of his shirt. The heavy scent of meat, even cooked, had caused a clawing sensation in his stomach. He could also smell boiled roots, and something sweet and salty-spicy. People glanced up as they passed but, again, with idle curiosity, not hostility.

By luck they stumbled onto a larger room, mostly occupied by a big stove of gold-colored ceramic, the source of the steam heat. Pipes led up from it into the ceiling and down through the stone floor, and it clanked and hissed and emitted heat like a bonfire. A waist-high section extended out, apparently for cooking.

A local woman stood at it, stirring something in a big pot that breathed sweet-scented steam. She had white beads braided into her long, curly hair and red curlicues incised on her tusks. Two children bundled up in knitted wool played on the floor, then stopped to stare up at the newcomers with big eyes. The woman looked up, and smiled. "Travelers? You want to buy food?"

"Yes, with this." Moon showed her Jade's ring.

She leaned in to look, lifting a finger to touch it carefully. Her fingernails were of rough horn, almost claw-like. She nodded approvingly. "White metal and a nice stone. That'll buy a lot of food."

Some of the tension uncoiled in Moon's spine. He would have hated to walk out of here empty-handed; remembering what it was like to be warm made the freezing wet night seem all the worse. "And a place to sleep."

The woman frowned and looked thoughtfully around the room, but apparently only because she was trying to sort out where to put them. "There's an empty crib at the top, but the wind-shield is broken and no one else wants it." She peered down at their bare feet. "You two might not mind it."

Moon and the woman negotiated, while Jade flicked her tail for the entertainment of the two children. They settled on a hot meal now and in the morning, space for the night, plus a sack of dried meat strips and other provisions to take with them when they left. The woman also threw in a flask of whatever was in the pot, which turned out to be a meat broth with dried berries in it. Jade looked mildly horrified, but Moon was happy with it. Altogether, the amount of food wasn't the equivalent of a whole herdbeast buck, but it would be enough to keep both of them flying all day tomorrow.

Following her instructions and carrying the blankets that came with the room, a lamp, and the basket of food, they followed a passage to stairs so narrow that Moon didn't know how wider groundlings could fit through. On each level, oddly shaped doorways led off to low-ceilinged passages divided up into cubbies, most of them blocked off by leather curtains. The Serican women seemed to have most of the second floor, and were busy hanging up icy coats and cloaks to drip in the passage. One did a double take as Jade went past, but then smiled and shook her head. Moon realized she must have caught a glimpse of Jade's blue scales and thought she was a stray Serican.

The room at the very top was theirs, the only one on that level. They both had to duck to get through the doorway. Light from the passage showed that the space was a little bigger than the cubbies below. It had a round window and, as the woman had said, the thin hide frame stretched over it was torn, letting in a cold draft. The only furniture was a hide to warm the stone floor and a thick sleeping mat stuffed with grasses. But a couple of the stove pipes came through the floor here, winding up and away into the wall, emitting heat and little traces of steam. Having direct access to the outside in case they needed to escape wasn't a bad thing, either.

"This," Jade said, with conviction, "was a wonderful idea." She tossed the blankets onto the sleeping mat and shed her wrap, shaking the melting ice out of her frills. "I would've given her that ring to sleep in a corner downstairs."

"That would have been bad bargaining," Moon informed her, setting the basket down.

While Jade hung her wrap over the window to block the worst of the drafts, Moon used flint and tinder to get the lamp lit. Instead of oil or a candle, it had a solid block of squishy material that the woman had said would burn most of the night, though not very brightly.

Once it was lit, the warm glow made the room cozy. Moon unpacked the basket of food, taking out the pleasantly warm clay pot first. Lifting the lid showed it was filled with meat in a thick, spice-scented sauce. Jade sat down across from him and took a piece from the pot, sniffing at it doubtfully. "Are you sure this doesn't spoil the meat?"

"It keeps it from spoiling." Moon ate a piece, licking the sauce off his fingers. There were also rounds of brown bread, another pot filled with bulbous purple roots and boiled greens, and sweet pastries with nuts and dried berries. They ate in companionable silence while the room grew warmer.

So far, they hadn't made anything but vague plans for what they would do when they arrived at the Cordans' valley. On their long flights, Moon had thought of a number of bad ideas, the worst of which was that they might try to steal someone, hopefully one of the elders, and convince him to reveal the location of the poison. Every idea seemed awkward at best, dangerous, and destined for failure. But until now he hadn't thought of the simplest solution, that Jade could pass as a groundling. She might be able to walk into the camp and ask for the poison, or at least for the knowledge to make it.

Jade bit into one of the purple roots and blinked at the taste, but still swallowed it. "You lived in places like this?"

Her tone made him look up, frowning.

"It's not that bad."

A lot of different groundlings must pass through here, and no one had taken much notice of them. It wouldn't make a good place to live; the terrain around the city was too barren to easily conceal shifting. And it was just too cold. She was still staring at him. He said, "Why?"

She shook her head. "Just trying to understand."

"Understand what?" Just to be an ass, he offered her the flask of fruit and meat soup.

She gave him a look, ignoring the flask. "Understand you."

Moon couldn't think why she would want to. He hadn't been making an effort to understand her, and had done everything he could to keep her at arm's length.

He broke the last round of bread apart, and tried not to ask; he didn't really want to know. But he found himself saying reluctantly, "And do you?"

She watched him long enough for him to have to fight the impulse to shift. Finally she said, "You're angry that we didn't find you sooner."

She was right about that, but it wasn't a revelation. It had been wearing on him since he had first arrived at Indigo Cloud. It made no sense, it wasn't logical or fair, by any stretch of the imagination, but he couldn't help feeling it. He shrugged, and bit into a chunk of bread.

Jade took her time as she finished a last strip of meat, then licked her fingers. Right at the moment when Moon thought he might be safe, she added, "And you're afraid, now that you've seen what your life with a court might have been like, that you'll have a harder time feeling contented in any place you settle."

That one was wide of the mark. Moon had seen close-knit communities before, had lived in beautiful places while knowing he didn't belong and couldn't risk remaining. He thought of the Hassi and their city above the link-trees. Not bothering to keep the sarcastic edge out of his voice, he said, "If I'd been able to choose what I was born as, I'd have picked something different." As long as it was something that could still fly.

She tilted her head thoughtfully. With real curiosity, she said, "If Pearl had accepted you from the first, would it have been different? Would you have wanted to stay?"

Moon looked away, his jaw tightening. There had been a moment when, if Pearl had asked nicely, she could have had him on the floor of the gathering hall in front of the entire court, and he knew it. He was afraid everyone else had known it, too. He didn't know whether to be angry at the rejection or relieved at the close call.

"You were expecting a consort from Star Aster," he said, "a sheltered, spoiled consort with a perfect bloodline. Are you asking me to believe that it wasn't a shock when Stone showed up with me?"

"I've known Stone all my life. I'm not surprised at anything he shows up with. You can't have come from a bad bloodline; you're strong, healthy, and your conformation is perfect." Jade lifted her brows. "And you're high-strung, shy, and have the same delicate sensibilities of every gently bred and sheltered consort I've ever met."

Moon knocked back the last of the fruit soup, and set the flask aside. "We need to sleep." He didn't know why he was angry with her, why he felt exposed to the bone. I am not high-strung.

Jade didn't pursue the argument or comment on his retreat, which just made Moon more irritated with her. When she started to push the blankets into a nest on the sleeping mat, Moon took one and retreated to the far edge. But he wasn't angry enough at her to sleep on the cold floor.

Chapter Thirteen

Moon snapped awake with the conviction that a Fell ruler stood over him. Beside him, Jade twitched upright, snarling. The faint lamplight showed the room was empty, but Fell scent hung in the air.

“Not here. It’s in the wind!” Jade threw blankets aside as she scrambled upright.

Appalled, Moon rolled to his feet. A Fell ruler flew somewhere nearby, over the pass or the valley, and the wind had carried the scent to them. Jade was already at the window, pulling the blanket and the torn wind-shield aside. Cold air blasted in as Moon leaned past her to see out.

The plaza below was empty, except for the wagons and the huddle of draught-beasts. Few windows were still lit, and the torch stands in the streets were dark. Heavy clouds cut off any glimpse of starlight. Moon could barely see. The night would be nearly impenetrable to most groundling eyes.

“It’s somewhere close,” Jade growled, and shifted to her winged form. She hooked her claws over the stone window sill and pulled herself up to climb out. “We have to kill it.”

“I know,” he snapped. The ruler couldn’t be allowed to follow them toward a Cordan camp. If the Cordans really had used their poison in the fighting in Kiaspur, the Fell could know about it, could realize that Moon and Jade meant to get it to use at the colony. Moon shifted and followed as Jade slid out the window.

Moon sunk his claws into the stone as the wind tore at him, threatening to rip him right off the wall. It was laden with ice sharp as needles, peppering his scales. He followed Jade up the side of the building, and dragged himself up onto the rounded roof.

They both crouched there, tasting the wind. Around the caravanserai was a dark sea of rocky rooftops, with chimneys releasing gusts of white steam. The sky was a featureless curve of solid cloud, the mountains visible only in outline. Sight was almost useless, and scent wasn’t much better; the wind gusted in all directions,

making the Ruler's trace seem to come from everywhere. Jade scanned the sky, snarling in irritation. "I can't tell the direction. We'll have to search."

And we have to split up, Moon thought. If they didn't find the ruler now, all it had to do was hide and wait for them to move on. "You take the north side. I'll take the south," he said, and let himself fall into the wind.

He flapped to get higher, banking toward the north peak and away from the city. He flew a hunting pattern over the dark slopes of the valley, following the wind currents and trying to pinpoint the Fell taint. Tantalizing him, it came and went.

The clouds drifted apart, allowing starlight to fall through, making it a little easier to see. Moon had covered half the valley when he sensed movement in the darkness above him. Knowing it wasn't Jade, he twisted sideways in one sharp motion. The dark shape of a Fell ruler plunged past him.

Hah! Finally. Moon dove after it, angling his wings for the least resistance. The ruler flapped frantically, trying to correct its out of control plunge. Before it could get its balance, Moon struck its back, using the claws on his feet to rake down the join of its wings.

The ruler rolled and made a wild grab for him but Moon dove past. Then he caught an updraft and rode it back up.

The ruler floundered in the air, shouting after him, "Did you think you could run from us? That I wouldn't follow you wherever you went?"

With a shock Moon recognized the voice. It was Kathras, the ruler who had come out of the colony to taunt Pearl. He thinks we were running? Moon banked around for another strike. As he dove, Kathras rolled to claw at him but Moon hit him hard, raked him across the belly with his feet and twisted away again. Kathras fell, extending his wings to save himself. Moon slipped sideways and hit Kathras at the wing join a third time. He felt something snap under his claws.

Kathras slashed up at him, then fell away, tumbling down toward the rocks below.

The ruler bounced off a crag, then fell down into a gorge. Moon spiraled down, mindful of the gusty wind. He spotted Kathras sprawled on a rocky ledge and landed on an outcrop just above him. He crouched to peer cautiously down at the ruler.

Kathras shoved unsteadily to his feet, his crumpled wing hanging limp. This close, Moon could see light-colored patches in the ruler's

scales, raw spots. Kathras quivered with weakness, and Moon scented blood, dried as well as fresh. He flew himself ragged to catch up with us. He did think we were running. Moon felt a surge of hope. If that was true, then the Fell didn't know about the Cordans or the poison; they believed Moon and Jade were trying to escape.

Looking up at him, Kathras whipped his tail, rage in every line of his body. He spat the words, "I thought we could speak in private. We have so much to say to one another."

"The only Fell I know are dead." Moon had never seen a ruler angry before, never seen one show any real emotion except amused contempt. That he had provoked it was a heady sensation, but not one he meant to enjoy for long.

Moon leapt down to the ledge and landed a few paces away from Kathras. He started forward. He needed to finish this and then find Jade, to tell her they didn't have to worry.

Then Kathras said, "You knew me in Saraseil."

Moon halted, shock freezing him into place. It's a trick, he reminded himself. It's always a trick. But he had never told anyone about Saraseil. There was no one left alive who knew he had ever been there. He managed to say, "That's a lie. He's dead."

"That was Liheas, blood of our blood. He thought he would bring you to us, to please us. But you betrayed us." Kathras hissed, bitter and reproachful. "Did you think we would forget?"

Liheas. It was eighteen turns ago and far across the Three Worlds, more than half his life ago, but the name was like a knife in his chest. Moon shook his head, furious, horrified. He couldn't believe this was happening; it had to be a nightmare. "Betrayed you? You—He lied to me, told me... I knew he was lying, he would have killed me."

Kathras shouted, "We would have given you what you wanted! We would have loved you, given you a place."

Moon surged forward to tear him apart. His claws were a hairsbreadth away from Kathras' throat, when Kathras shifted.

It didn't look as it did when Raksura shifted; there was no blurring of vision, no illusion of mist or smoke. It was as if Kathras' body became liquid and flowed into another shape.

He looked like the groundling form of an Aeriati, tall and slim. But instead of a copper or dark tone, his skin was as white as alabaster, gleaming faintly in the starlight. His black hair was long and fine, and he had a straight nose and wide-set eyes. He was dressed in dark, silky garments, torn and ragged in the wind. Kathras was a beautiful

groundling, but no more so than Balm or Chime or any of the other young Aeriats. But there was something that pulled at Moon, an uncanny attraction, an empty beauty that drew him in to fill the void.

Moon looked into those eyes, and knew whatever had lived in them, whoever it was who had spoken to him, was already gone. He ripped his claws across Kathras' throat.

He tore the flesh open to the bone, blood gushing over his hand. Kathras' head tipped back and he collapsed like an empty sack.

Breathing hard, Moon backed away, shaking the blood off his claws. It didn't help.

Then he felt something watching him. He looked up.

Jade perched on the crag just above him.

For a heartbeat, Moon had a stupid hope that she hadn't heard them. Then she leapt down onto the ledge, and he knew she had heard, and that she was going to kill him. And he was going to let her.

Jade looked at him for a long moment, while the cold wind pulled at them and shock froze Moon into a statue. He couldn't read her expression.

Then Jade hissed and turned away. She put a foot on Kathras' chest, reached down, and laced her claws through his hair. With one sharp jerk, she ripped his head off. Moon watched her scrape at the gravel at the base of the rock, carving out a hollow to drop the head into. She pushed the gravel back over it, covering the white face. Moon knew earth was better, but the ground was frozen, and the pebbles would make enough of a barrier to keep the other Fell from being drawn to Kathras' body.

Jade caught his shoulder and shook him. Moon flinched away, but she just said, "Can you hear me?"

He realized she had been speaking while he had stood there staring at Kathras' corpse. "What?"

"We're going back to the city." She took his chin, and turned his head to face her, making him meet her eyes. "Follow me. You understand?"

He nodded and followed when she leapt up to the crag, and then into the air.

They flew back to the city through the darkness and the icy wind, spiraling down to land on the round roof of the caravanserai. Crouched on the rocky tiles, Jade pointed for Moon to go first. He climbed down the wall to crawl in through the window.

Inside, the lamp still burned, throwing warm yellow light over the sleeping mat, the tumbled blankets, their pack, and the basket and pots from their meal. Automatically, Moon shifted back to groundling. The melting ice on his scales immediately soaked his clothes. Sheltered from the freezing wind, the room should be warm, but he couldn't feel anything. His legs gave out and he sank down to sit on the floor.

Jade climbed in through the window and shifted back to Arbora, her frills dripping ice. She picked up the wooden frame of the windshield and jammed it back into the window with one violent shove. Then she turned and sat down, facing Moon. Her face intent, she leaned forward, bracing her hands on the floor and spreading her claws. "Tell me."

Moon stared at her, then took a sharp breath. It took effort to get the words out.

"Saraseil was a city on the gulf of Abascene. I was there when the Fell passed through it, about eighteen turns ago. I'd never seen Fell before." He shook his head slowly, trying to think how to explain. "They were shifters that flew."

Jade hissed under her breath, something in Raksuran Moon had never heard before. She flicked her claws impatiently. "I see. Go on."

"The Fell took the citadel first, in the center of the city, and the groundlings were all running away, or trying to. Everything was falling apart. The dakti and kethel were killing people in the streets, digging through the walls of the houses to get to them. I didn't want to think I was a Fell, that I came from things that would do that. But I had to know." He realized he was shivering, and rubbed his hands on his damp shirt. He felt an incredible distance between then and now, as if he were telling a story that had happened to someone else. Maybe he had been someone else then, the way he had been someone else before Sorrow and the others died. "I flew to the roof of the citadel and got inside through a window. But I couldn't get close enough to see anything, so I let the dakti catch me, and they took me to the ruler in the council hall. I asked what I was."

Jade's expression could have been carved out of the mountain's bedrock. He couldn't tell what she thought. She said, "Did it tell you that you were a Fell?"

"Yes."

Jade's eyes narrowed. "And you believed it?"

"No. I knew it was lying. As soon as I saw it..." Moon tried to

think how to describe that moment of realization, of relief and horror all mixed together. As soon as he had looked into the ruler's eyes, he had recognized the lie. That whatever he was, it wasn't this. And he had understood just how big a mistake he had made in going to the citadel and drawing the Fell's attention. "I knew it would never tell me what I was."

Jade looked away, the tense lines of her shoulders and spines relaxing minutely. "How did you escape?"

"The ruler took me up to the rooms where the Saraseil lords lived. Everything was torn apart, like they had looted the place but hadn't taken anything. There was a dead woman there, a groundling woman. Everything smelled like death." The memory was like a particularly vivid dream image: the torn silk drapes, the fine glitter of shattered wood and ivory, the woman's blood on the bed cushions.

"I went out on the balcony, and the city was burning." He had liked that city, too. It had had a busy port, and drew groundlings from far across the Three Worlds. Moon had blended right in, and he had done well there. "The ruler said I belonged with him, that he was going to keep me forever."

Like Kathras, Liheas' groundling form had been beautiful, dark hair like silk and unmarked skin and eyes such a deep, vivid blue. Moon had known then why so many groundlings let the Fell in. The beauty of the rulers, and their power to influence, hid the horror of the kethel and the dakti until it was too late.

Liheas had said he loved him. Moon hadn't believed it, but he had been caught enough in the spell to let the creature take him, out there on the balcony while Saraseil burned.

"I waited until he went to sleep. Then I snapped his neck and set the room on fire, and then I flew away."

Jade stared, startled, then shook her head. Her voice dry, she said, "That must have been a shock for the Fell. That's usually their role." She sat back, watching him thoughtfully. "And you didn't tell us because...?"

"How could it matter? It was turns ago." It wasn't that he hadn't thought about Saraseil in a long time; it was that he hadn't thought about it ever, except to take it as a lesson to stop looking for his past. The whole thing had been a nightmare. "I never thought about it."

She was giving him that look again; he couldn't tell if she believed him or not. She said, "So if you don't think about it, it's as if it never happened?"

Moon shrugged helplessly. "It worked until now."

Jade sighed, obviously giving up on that point. "So that ruler is dead, but before you killed it, it must have... shared the memory."

"I didn't know they could do that, then. I found out more about them after-ward, by talking to groundlings in Kish." Moon rubbed his face, trying to banish the images. His hands were still painfully numb and his skin felt like ice.

Jade nodded understanding. "When you were looking for us."

"I stopped looking for what I was. After that, I just didn't care anymore. It didn't seem as if there was any point." The room must be warm. Wisps of steam still came from the heating pipes. But the bone-chilling cold had settled into his body to stay. At least it made it easier to think. "This can't be the same Fell flight that attacked Saraseil. It was too long ago, on the far coast."

Jade waved a hand, her mouth set in a rueful line. "Their bloodlines range far across the Three Worlds. If it was a related flight, they could still share memories."

That was a frightening thought, but it was the only thing that made sense, the only explanation for how Kathras could know Moon. He protested, "But the Fell couldn't have come to Indigo Cloud because of me. They were talking to Pearl before Stone found me."

Jade didn't look convinced. She said, "If it is you they came for, they would've had to know that you would eventually come to Indigo Cloud, that if they waited long enough, they would find you there. That's a mentor's power again."

If the Fell had come to Indigo Cloud because they had somehow known that Moon would eventually go there... They could have been following me for turns and turns. The thought made him sick. All the places he had been, where Fell or rumors of Fell had followed him. If they were looking for me... No, that can't be true. They would have found him before now. They would have found him when he had come out of Kish again and gone back toward the east. He had enough trouble. He didn't need to borrow more.

He looked up to see Jade watching him with a frown. She said, "You're still shaking."

"I can't get warm." The ice was inside his skin, in his thoughts. He supposed if Jade was going to kill him, she would have done it by now. If he was going to be alive in the morning, he needed to be able to fly. "I'll go downstairs." He started to push to his feet.

Jade caught his arm and pulled him back down beside her. He

twitched in a half-hearted attempt to escape, but she wrapped a strong arm around his waist, pulling him back against her chest.

“No, just stay,” she said, but her voice was gentle. He was so cold and tense that his body felt brittle, and her hands, even through his damp clothes, were pure heat. Then he realized the cloud of warmth enfolding him was from her half-furled wings, that she had just shifted out of her Arbora form. “No, if anybody sees—”

“Everyone’s asleep,” she said into his ear. She waited patiently until he subsided, then gave him a reassuring squeeze. Moon gave in, sinking back against her.

She held him close, and ran her palm over his arms, his chest, soothing his shivers away. Her scales caught against his groundling skin, and the effect was hypnotic. Then she nuzzled his ear, soft and warm, and her teeth grazed the back of his neck. The gentle bite sent a shock right down his spine. Moon made a noise embarrassingly close to a squeak.

Jade pulled back, startled. “Sorry.”

After everything that had happened tonight, he hadn’t thought he could feel anything. Suddenly he could feel everything, everywhere. Something had broken free inside him. He said, “No, don’t... don’t stop.”

She gripped his shoulders and turned him around to face her, moving him as if he didn’t weigh anything. He had never been more vulnerable. He was in groundling form, and she could keep him from shifting. It should have been frightening, but it just made him want to wrap himself around her and bite her neck. “Moon, do you know what you’re saying?”

“Yes. What?” His senses had been stifled by the cold buther scent was suddenly overwhelming. He tried to lean in toward her.

Jade held him back, her frills twitching in frustration. She tried again, “Why now?”

It took an effort, but he made himself articulate his racing thoughts. “Because you know everything, and you still want me.”

Jade growled, in a deep tone he hadn’t heard before. She pushed him down, flattening him to the pallet.

Before this, Moon had always had to hold back, to be careful. It wasn’t just that most groundlings were weaker and more fragile than he was. He had always been afraid that something would happen at a vulnerable moment, that if he let himself relax completely, he might just shift. This time he didn’t hold back at all, and it felt so right it left

him dazed.

Afterward, he lay on the pallet with Jade wrapped around him, sated and content and pleasantly achy in just the right places. He listened to the low buzzing growl of satisfaction in her chest and thought, Stone was right. The bastard. Moon was terrified of not fitting into the court, so afraid that he was willing to let Pearl force him out, when instinct said to fight to stay.

After tonight, spending his life defying Pearl and watching his back in Indigo Cloud didn't seem so much worse than lying his way into another groundling settlement, or moving aimlessly from one trade city to another. The first option might be just as fraught, but it came with companionship and sex and not having to hide what he was. At least he could just give it some time and see what happened.

With more than a tinge of irony, he told himself, You've got that settled. Now you just need to get the court away from the Fell. If they couldn't, if their plans failed...

He tugged one of Jade's frills. "Pearl said if we gave up, the Wind Sun Court would take in the Arbora and the warriors. She didn't say what would happen to you."

He felt her shake her head. "Pearl and I won't leave the court."

She was telling him that she and Pearl would stay to fight the Fell to the death. It shouldn't surprise him; it was what he had seen groundlings do. He hesitated longer over the next question. He knew most groundling women couldn't tell right away, but if there was a chance, he wanted to know. "Did you get a clutch?"

She nuzzled his temple. "No."

That was fast. "How do you know?" he said suspiciously.

She sounded wry. "We're not like groundlings, Moon. It's not random chance." Her voice turned grim. "I won't have a clutch until the court is free."

He had to admit that was probably for the best. He thought about the others, trapped with the Fell, and reminded himself, We're nearly there. One more day's flight and they would be past the mountains and over the jungle valleys where the Cordans' camp lay.

Jade sat up a little, looking down at him, her eyes serious. "I want you to promise me that if we fail, you'll lead the survivors to Wind Sun."

Moon fought the urge to argue. He didn't want her to think about giving up. But he knew she had to face all the possibilities.

Reluctantly, he said, "I'll do it. If it comes to that."

He felt the tension in her body ease a little. She added, "The second consort there is Dust, one of the consorts Pearl sent away when Rain died. He may be able to get you a place in their court. Promise me you'll try."

Because begging a place in Indigo Cloud has turned out so well, Moon thought, that I should try it again with another court. That he wouldn't promise. "No."

"Moon." She set her jaw in exasperation. "Do you have any idea what it costs me to tell you to seek another queen?"

"I won't seek another queen." He buried his face against her neck. "So that's settled."

"Moon." Jade growled, and shook him a little. "For once in your life, listen to someone."

"Ow. No."

"Moon." She gritted her teeth, then hissed in frustration, settling down and curling around him. "Just... go to sleep."

That he could do.

Chapter Fourteen

“Just be careful.” Moon was having second and third thoughts about this plan.

“I know.” Jade, in her Arbora form, took the pack and slung it over her shoulder. They were in a small clearing in the jungle, on the slopes above the Cordan camp. The warm damp air and bright sun were a welcome relief after the cold of the mountains. Tall trees heavy with vines overhung the clearing.

They had flown through the day and most of the night to get here, arriving in the valley with just enough strength left to collapse. Moon had led the way to a large tree he had occasionally used for naps while he was out hunting. They had tucked themselves in between two branches and slept curled in each other’s arms. The next morning they had cautiously scouted the area on foot, finding a vantage point where they could observe the camp from a distance. From what Moon could tell, little seemed to have changed, though the flying island had drifted further down the valley. He reminded himself he hadn’t been gone long; it only felt like a lifetime ago.

Now Jade tugged at the neck of her smock. “Do I look enough like a groundling woman for them?”

Before leaving the mountain town, they had bought a brown cotton garment from the woman who ran the caravanserai. It wasn’t much different from what the Cordan women wore, and hung down to Jade’s knees, tied at the waist. With the pack and a length of wood as a staff, she did look as if she could have been traveling on foot. They had decided she would tell the Cordans that she came from the south, and that her settlement was in danger of attack by Fell, that she had heard about the poison from rumors brought by travelers from Kiaspur. Moon had heard enough about the Cordans’ homeland to give her convincing secondhand detail about it, things she would have been told by people who had been there. And he had also given her every detail about how to pretend to be a groundling that he could remember. There was only one problem.

“Can you hide your tail?” he asked.

She tilted her head in mock inquiry. “Hide it where?”

“Tuck it up around your waist.”

She folded her arms, eyeing him warily. “Are you serious?”

He caught her tail and pointed to the spade shape on the end. “This is distinctive. If Ilane sees this—”

“All right, all right.” She pulled it out of his hand, and pushed it under her skirt, frowning in concentration as she coiled it around her waist. “There.”

“Just be—”

She caught his shirt, pulled him in, and nipped his ear. “I’ll be careful. I’ll meet you at the river at nightfall.”

He watched her walk away through the trees, picking her way down the slope. He told himself she looked like a groundling; no one in the mountain city had noticed anything out of the ordinary. But they aren’t as hysterical about Fell as the Cordans, he thought, and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. It was going to be a long day.

Taking the opposite direction, Moon shifted and climbed the nearest tree, their vantage point on the river flat. He climbed high enough that he had a good view of the fields that led down to the river, and the camp.

It still looked much the same; the fence of bundled sticks enclosing the conical tents, the greenroot plantings at the edge of the river, smoke rising up from cooking fires. At this time of day the river bank was busy: children swam, women washed clothing or carried water jars back up to the tents.

Moon perched on a branch and waited nervously as he watched Jade walk out of the edge of the forest, cross the open field, then arrive at the camp’s makeshift gate. It still stood open for the hunters who would trickle back in groups before sunset. She spoke to the gate guard, who was not Hac, fortunately. Fortunately for Hac, at any rate; Moon didn’t think Jade would be as patient as he had been.

More Cordans gathered round, drawn by the appearance of a stranger, but no one seemed agitated or upset. After a short time, Jade walked with them into the camp, heading toward the elders’ tent.

Moon settled back, hissing in anxious frustration. He had nothing to do but wait.

The afternoon wore on, and Moon watched the hunters return, recognizing Kavath from a distance by his pale blue skin and crest. There had been no unusual disturbance in the camp. He caught the occasional glimpse of Jade, walking between the tents. It was too far

away to recognize anyone else. He would have liked to know where Selis was living, if she had found a better place. He wondered how he would feel if he saw Ilane, and twitched uncomfortably.

When night gathered in the valley, Moon uncoiled out of the branches and jumped to the next tree, and the next, working his way through the forest, down the hills and toward the river. It helped that he knew where all the Cordans' hunting trails lay so there was little chance of encountering anyone. It was dark by the time he reached the river bank, well above the Cordan camp.

Still in his Raksuran form, he slipped down into the water and let the current carry him along, just a dark, drifting shape. As he drew near the camp, he went under, swimming into the thick reeds. In that concealment, he surfaced just enough so that his ears, eyes, and nose were above the water.

He heard the normal evening sounds of the camp, conversations, children shouting and laughing as they played. He smelled wood smoke and once-familiar people, and the greenroot they boiled or baked for dinner. A few women came down the sandy bank to wash cooking pans, but the time for bathing and swimming was past, and most of the camp would be sitting outside their tents to eat.

Then he caught Jade's scent. Unexpectedly, it stirred sudden heat in his belly. He told himself not to be an idiot. He had only been away from her half a day.

A few moments later, she appeared over the top of the bank. She moved idly, as if she was only here to enjoy the cool breeze off the river. Moon splashed, just loud enough for her to hear.

She walked down the sand to the shallows, wetting her feet, then wandered casually toward the reeds. When she was close enough, she whispered, "I assume that's you."

Moon swam a little closer, lying flat in the shallows, still mostly concealed by the reeds. "Well?"

She hissed between her teeth, controlled and angry. "We have a problem. I don't think they'll give it to me."

Moon was so startled he almost sat up. "What? Why not?"

"I've told them our settlement is under attack by the Fell, that we need the poison to help fight them off. I offered to buy it, I tried to give them my rings, but they wouldn't take them. They seem sympathetic, they told me stories of what happened to their cities, but they say the poison won't help me. They keep hinting that I should stay here and join them." She kicked at a clump of weeds, every line

of her body tense with frustration. "It's partly the timing. They know there are no other groundling tribes or settlements close by. I've had to make them think I've been walking for days and days, over dangerous territory. They think it will be too late by the time I get back."

"Stupid bastards." Moon sunk under the water to keep from growling. Even if they thought Jade would be too late to help her people, withholding the poison just seemed cruel. Better to let her have it and at least try to get back in time. And it was for their own damn good; killing Fell benefited everybody. Especially these Fell, with the odd abilities they seemed to have. He surfaced again. "Damn it."

"I'd try to steal some, but I can't get them to give me any clue where they keep it, or how they make it, or even if they have any on hand." Jade shook her head frills. "Any ideas?"

Moon could only think of one possibility. "There's a woman named Selis. I lived with her, and she knew what I was. If you can talk to her alone, tell her... Tell her the truth."

Jade hesitated, drawing her toes through the sand. "Are you certain? If she betrays us to the others, there's no chance left of getting it by stealth. We'd have to fight them for it."

"I don't know," Moon had to admit. Anything was possible. Especially with Selis. But she had been openly contemptuous of the elders and pretty much everyone else in the camp. And she had had plenty of opportunity to betray him before, and hadn't. "She's the only one who might be willing to help us. If she wants to talk to me, tell her to come out to the forest tomorrow morning." Women often went outside the camp in the mornings to pick bandan leaves, dig roots, and collect whatever nuts and fruit were ripe. It was the best opportunity to speak unobserved.

Jade thought about it a moment more, staring thoughtfully off across the river. "All right," she said finally. "I'll find her."

"I'll watch for you. Good luck." Moon slipped under again, and pulled himself along the bottom until he could swim upstream.

Moon caught his own dinner in the river, since it was easier than hunting the forest in the dark. After that he went back through the trees to his perch, watched the dark camp, and slept in snatches. It was a nerve-racking wait.

Finally, just before dawn grayed the sky, Hac pushed the gate open and stood in the gap, scratching himself. The hunters left first, a

long straggling column of men taking the trail that led up the slopes into the forest. Then, as the morning light grew brighter, the women and older children started to come out.

They were in small groups of three or four, carrying baskets, wandering across the field to the fringes of the forest. Trailing after one group was Jade, taller than the others and distinctive even in the brown smock. Beside her was a short, sturdy Cordan woman with a basket on her hip.

They let the others draw ahead, then angled toward the fringe of the forest. Careful not to rustle the branches, Moon climbed down the tree, and made his way through the forest toward the point where they would enter it.

He waited for them a couple of hundred paces into the trees, screened by the tall fronds of the ground plants. He finally heard footsteps in the bracken: Selis' steps. Jade, even in Arbora form, moved in near silence. He shifted to groundling.

As they drew closer, Moon heard Selis say, "Are you sure he's here? He's not reliable."

Moon stepped out of concealment, and Selis stopped short. Moon made himself stand still, though he was suddenly aware that his heart pounded with tension. Seeing Selis again was stranger than he had thought it would be.

They stared at each other. Then Selis said, with deliberate irony, "It's all right. I made sure Ilane didn't follow me."

It caught Moon by surprise, and he snorted in bitter amusement. "That makes one of us."

"It's not funny." She took a few steps closer. "I'm living with my sister now."

Moon winced sympathetically, for the sister and for Selis. Selis hated her family and, from what he had been able to tell, the feeling was mutual.

Making it sound like an accusation, she said, "They said you were dead, that you got carried away by a Fell."

"It wasn't a Fell."

Her expression suggested he was still just as stupid as she remembered. "That I figured out for myself." She sniffed and added, "Ilane is living with Ildras."

Moon folded his arms, feeling his jaw tighten. Ildras, the chief hunter, had been a friend. And he had already been living with two

women. Somehow Moon didn't see Ilane taking third place. "What about Fianis and Elene?"

"They're practically her servants now." Selis and Moon shared a look of mutual disgust. A little tension went out of Selis' shoulders, and she tossed her basket on the ground. "So you want the poison."

He nodded. "Jade told you why?"

Selis sighed, and scratched at a bug bite on her arm. "It's been used in the east, down in the peninsula, for a long time. It's not as good a weapon as they tell each other. You have to get it inside the Fell or it's useless. The story says that the last garrison of Borani in Kiaspur drank it." She rolled her eyes. "A seer told them it would save them. It didn't do anything to the men, but the Fell ate them, then sickened and couldn't pursue the refugees."

Jade lifted her brows, startled. "I can see why it's a last resort."

Selis threw her a dark look. "A last resort for fools."

"We know where these Fell are living," Moon told Selis. "We can get it into their water."

Selis' permanent frown turned thoughtful. "That could work," she admitted grudgingly. "I've never heard that done before, but then all we know are rumors. They say the Duazi, a wild tribe down in the moss forests, found it by accident. It was in their food, and they've never been attacked by the Fell since."

"Do you know what's in it?" Jade asked, watching her sharply.

"No. But it must be things that are easily found or we wouldn't have it. I know they keep it in the elders' meeting tent." Selis lifted her chin and looked hard at Moon. "I want to see you."

Moon knew what she meant, but it felt like a strangely intimate thing to do. He had always had two lives, one as a groundling and one as something else. Once he met Stone, the two lives had come together, but Selis had only known him as a groundling. "You've seen me."

She took another step forward, determined. "Not up close. Change."

It was a challenge, and he didn't want to show his reluctance. Moon shifted, on impulse making it happen slowly. Selis, being Selis, didn't flinch. He settled into his Raksuran form, and she studied him, leaning in. He raised the frills and spines around his head, showing his mane. After a moment, she reached up and touched his nose. She said, "It still looks like you."

“It is me.”

She blinked at his voice, then stepped back. “I’ll get the poison for you. I’ll try to copy the ingredients out of the elders’ simple book, or get one of the vials they keep already made up.”

Jade closed her eyes briefly in relief, then asked Selis, “What do you want in exchange?” She turned to reach into her pack. “We have gems and metal.”

Selis shook her head impatiently. “I’ve no use for it. There’s no one to trade it to. And what else would I do with it? Wear it?” Her laugh was abrupt and bitter. “I’m doing this for myself, to spite Ilane and the elders.”

Moon shifted back to groundling, finding it easier to argue with her that way. “Then let us take you somewhere, another settlement. There’s one on our way back, a trading city in the mountains. A lot of travelers go through there. You could get passage down into Kish.”

Selis looked as if that was the worst idea she had ever heard, but that was nothing new. “I couldn’t leave the camp.”

Impatiently, Moon demanded, “Why not? You hate everybody here.”

Selis folded her arms stubbornly. “It’s what I’m used to.”

Moon knew all about that. He said, “You can get used to something else.”

Selis looked, if anything, more stubborn, and Jade put in quickly, “You don’t have to decide now. Think about it, and tell us what you want when you bring us the poison.”

Selis shrugged. She leaned down to reach for the basket, but Moon beat her to it, picking it up to hand to her. She snatched it, glared at him, and stamped away.

Jade shouldered her pack and moved to follow Selis, saying, “I’ll meet you after dark at the river.”

Moon watched them go. This should work. If the Cordans had really believed Jade’s story, if Selis didn’t get caught searching for the poison. Those are big ifs. And he had another long day of waiting ahead.

At dusk, Moon slipped into the river again and drifted downstream. He arrived a little early, and though the shadows were heavy, a few women still rinsed out the big clay jars used to store seed flour, and their children splashed in the shallows. Moon stayed away from the bank, hooking his claws around a rock and letting his face

break the surface just enough to let him breathe. The water pulled at his spines and frills as if he was a drifting weed.

Finally the women carried the jars away and the children reluctantly followed. Moon let go of the rock and drifted closer, fetching up in the reeds where he had waited for Jade last night.

Darkness fell, and he caught faint, distant voices from the camp, though he couldn't make out the words. Time crept on and Moon started to fidget, absently ripping up weeds from the sandy bottom. Where are they?

Then he heard feet pounding on packed earth, and a moment later Selis ran over the top of the bank. She reached the shallows, hastily wading out until she was knee-deep. "Moon!" she whispered harshly. "Are you—yah!"

Selis hopped sideways, cursing, as Moon stood up out of the water. He shifted to groundling and demanded, "What's wrong?"

"They must have been suspicious of her all along, and then they saw her talk to me," Selis explained rapidly. She waved her hands in frustration. "They never pay heed to me. Why should they do it now?"

Moon felt his heart nearly stop. "They caught her?" He started for shore. "They saw her shift?"

"No, I think it was Ilane." Selis splashed after him. "Fianis said Ilane saw something about Jade, something that reminded her of you. She said Ilane told the elders about it and made them suspicious."

Moon ran up the bank and through the greenroot plantings, Selis hurrying after him. It was dark between the tents ahead, but the common spaces were all lit by cooking fires and torches. And he could hear voices raised in argument. Jade said in exasperation, "Why do you think I want it? I want to kill Fell! That's the only thing it's good for, isn't it?"

Slipping through the first few rows of tents, Moon saw that Jade stood in the center of the camp with a milling crowd of Cordans gathered around. Most seemed more confused than angry. Jade faced the elders Dargan and Tacras, with Ildras, Kavath, and some of the other hunters surrounding her. And Ilane stood behind Ildras, watching with wide-eyed concern. She was also the only Cordan woman toward the front of the crowd. The others had all drawn back out of the conflict.

She's behind this, Moon thought, torn between anger and exasperation. Of course. Selis and Fianis were right; Ilane had seen something about Jade. Something that had told her that Jade was like

Moon.

Grimly determined, Dargan told Jade, “We know you are lying to us! There is no settlement near here, no place you could walk from in the time you say.”

Moon stopped at the edge of the communal space, catching Selis’ arm. The elders’ tent was a large conical structure on the far side of the open area. The flaps were drawn back and a couple of lamps were lit inside. A few people sat in front of it, watching the confrontation. He told her, “When they’re distracted, go get the poison.”

Selis threw him a dark look. “Make it a good distraction.”

Selis slipped into the shadows, circling around the crowd. Moon started forward. Between the confusion and fitful light of the torches, no one had noticed him yet. Many of the hunters still carried their weapons, long spears for killing the smaller vargits, bows with bone-tipped arrows.

“Tell us who you are!” Tacras faced Jade, angry and a little frightened. “Are you Fell?”

“Of course not,” Jade snapped, and Moon could hear the frustrated growl under her voice. “My people have been attacked by the Fell. We need help, help that you can provide! That should be the only thing that matters!”

Tacras fell back a step and Dargan looked uncertain. The other Cordans stirred uneasily. Moon knew one reason why they were suspicious. To their eyes, Jade was a woman alone facing an angry crowd, but she wasn’t the least bit afraid of them.

Almost sounding as if he were trying to be reasonable, Dargan said, “But you aren’t telling us everything. Even if there was a settlement nearby, why would they send only one of their number on such a dangerous journey?”

Jade started to answer, but Ilane shouted, “She lies! I told you, she looks like him. Her skin has the same pattern as the Fell that was among us.”

“You should know!” someone in the back of the crowd yelled. Moon was pretty certain that was Fianis, who Ilane had replaced in Ildras’ tent.

Ilane tossed her head, angry at the barb. “I speak the truth!”

Jade grimaced, and Moon snarled under his breath, annoyed at

himself. Damn, didn't think of that. He and Jade had the same pattern to their scales, but he hadn't thought Ilane had caught more than a glimpse of him in his other form. But she saw you after she gave you the poison. She must have sat there in the tent and watched him, while Selis slept and Moon lay in a drugged stupor, the pattern appearing on his skin. It made his flesh creep.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jade tried, folding her arms. "I think that woman's mad with... something."

Dargan didn't seem pleased by Ilane's interruption, but he said to Jade, "Then tell us why you came here alone."

Selis had reached the side of the elders' tent, waiting for a chance to slip through the entrance. The people sitting outside it hadn't moved. Moon stepped forward. Letting his voice carry, he said, "She's not alone."

Everyone turned. A confused murmur rose from the people on the far edge of the crowd who couldn't see. But the group around the elders stood still, stunned into silence.

"It's him!" Ilane shouted, ducking behind Ildras. "I told you!"

Moon shifted and leapt into the air. Everybody screamed and scrambled to get away. He spread his wings, flaring his spines and frills, and landed next to Jade. She gave him an annoyed look and said in Raksuran, "I assume this is a plan."

"Selis is in the elders' tent," he told her.

"Good." Jade shifted and flared her wings out with a violent snap.

More Cordans screamed and ran. Arrows flew, but Moon ducked and twisted away. Jade charged the archers and they scattered. She leapt to the top of a tent, flaring her wings again to draw everyone's gaze.

Ildras ran at Moon with a barbed spear. Moon caught the weapon and yanked it out of his hands. Careful to pull the blow, he used the hilt to slam Ildras in the head. Ildras staggered backward and collapsed.

Selis bolted out of the elders' tent. Moon shouted, "You've got it?"

"Yes!" She held up a woven bag.

Moon shot forward, caught her around the waist and jumped into the air, snapping his wings out to take flight. Jade followed right behind him.

Selis shrieked and grabbed his shoulders, her face buried against

the flanges protecting his collarbone. Moon said in her ear, "Wrap your arms around my neck."

After a moment she loosened her grip enough to do it, winding her arms carefully between his spines.

Moon banked toward the flying island, its shape outlined against the starlit sky. They needed a chance to talk and to look at what Selis had managed to steal.

If the Cordans were still watching, they might see them land there, but there wasn't anything they could do about it.

He lighted in an open court, with a long, vine-choked pool and crumbling pillars. He set Selis down. She stumbled to the pool, sitting heavily on the edge to splash the stale water on her face.

Jade landed beside Moon, folding her wings. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

"No. Maybe." He had to point out, "You're a terrible liar."

"Yes, I realize that." She shook her ruffled frills, still irritated. "I was going to leave them a ring to make up for it, but if that's the way they're going to behave, forget it."

Still leaning over the water, Selis waved a hand at her. "Don't waste your gems. Those dungheads aren't worth it." She sat up, dug in the bag, and pulled out a rolled bandan leaf and a small wooden jug with a clay stopper. "I hope this is what you need. I just pulled the page out of their simple book. They had jugs of the stuff all made up, a dozen or more."

Moon shifted to groundling, and sat down on the moss-stained paving as Jade took the leaf. Jade unrolled it, angling it so the faint starlight would fall on it. In Altanic, it read, Three-leafed purple bow, boil until blue, strain liquid, boil again...

"Can we get this in the west?" he said. He had never heard of purple bow, three-leafed or not.

Jade thought for a moment. "If it's what I think it is. A flower that grows inside the boles of spiral trees?" she asked Selis.

"Yes." Selis frowned at the leaf, squinting to see it in the dark. "From what I could tell, it's just a simple, boiled down over and over again."

Moon took the stopper out of the jug and cautiously sniffed it. It had only a faint, weedy odor, but a familiar one that he was unlikely to forget. "This is what they gave me."

“Good.” Jade sighed in relief, resting her head in her hand. She looked at Selis. “I take it you don’t want to go back to your camp.”

“No.” Selis shrugged, resigned. “I suppose I should take this as a sign. I’ll go to that mountain city you mentioned.” She stopped, suddenly appalled. “By go there, you mean fly there, don’t you?”

Moon gave her a look. “No, we’re going to walk. It’ll take half a turn, at least, and—”

“Fine.” Disgruntled, Selis flicked a hand at him. “Just don’t drop me.”

Because time was short, they left that night, taking Selis with them and flying toward the mountain city. Moon had a few ideas about preparing Selis for the flight, from his experience of being carried in groundling form by Stone. They cut up a blanket to wrap inside her Cordan sandals, turning them into warmer boots, and cut another piece for her to use as a hood and scarf. Since all Selis had was a light cotton tunic, they gave her all their clothes, which amounted to Moon’s pants and shirt, and the rough smock Jade had gotten at the caravanserai. The woven silk of the Raksuran fabric did the most to protect her from the cold wind during flight, but it still wasn’t easy for her, and they stopped periodically to rest and let her recover a little.

It was late afternoon when they arrived on the opposite side of the pass from the city. Moon and Jade shifted to their other forms, took their clothes back, and Selis bundled up in the remaining blankets. Then they walked up the road to the city’s bridge. Selis was exhausted and pale under her light green skin, but triumphant at making it there alive.

They took a space at the caravanserai for Selis. Moon and Jade meant to stay there only long enough to rest and stock up on food for the balance of the flight through the mountains. Moon had been trying to think of a story to explain their reappearance with Selis, but Selis had supplanted anything he could have come up with by airily telling the proprietor, “They’re helping me leave my family, who are all dungheads.”

They had arrived in time to catch the Serican traders before they started their journey back down the pass toward the Kishan territories. The Sericans were taking several passengers already, including a local family, and two women of the small-statured groundling race with the little horns. Moon sat with Selis while she bargained for her passage, but she did a good job of it, especially considering it was her first time.

Jade had already given Selis the rest of her jewelry—rings, necklace, and belt—which would be a small fortune in Kish. The caravanserai keeper had helped her convert one of the rings into little lumps of white metal, which were currency here and in Kish, so she could pay for her passage and supplies.

After the passage was arranged, Moon and Selis walked out into the plaza outside the caravanserai. It was still cold, but the morning was bright and sunny, the sky a deep, cloudless blue, promising better weather for Moon and Jade's journey back through the mountains. Since they had arrived, a little market had sprung up in the plaza, with hides spread out on the paving where the locals sold metalwork, leather, furs, and knitted wool clothing. Inside an open tent, a young woman carved tusk tattoos for the local men.

The Sericans had advised Selis on what supplies she would need for the journey, and Moon followed her around while she bought real boots and a fur-lined coat. Jade was asleep up in their cubby, and Moon knew he should join her. His back ached, and he was so tired that everything—the rock towers that loomed over them, the wagon the Sericans loaded, the awnings and wares of the market—had taken on a bright edge.

Selis pulled on the coat she had just bought, which was a little too big for her.

Once she was down in the Kishan valleys, it could easily be resold to traders going up the mountain route. She smoothed a hand over the leather, and not looking at Moon, said, "You were right. About leaving. Every moment away from those people is a relief. It's been so long since Kiaspur was destroyed, I forgot what a city was like. I thought I'd be afraid to be alone, but..." She shrugged, obviously uncomfortable expressing herself. "I want to see Kish."

Moon didn't need Selis to thank him, or to tell him he was right. She had trusted him when she didn't have to, helped him and Jade when it would have been easier and safer to do nothing. He just said, "There's lots of different travelers and traders in Kish. It's easy to blend in."

She watched him a moment. "And you're going to help these people kill Fell."

"They're my people." It felt strange to say it. He had only admitted it to himself a few days ago, and it still didn't feel quite real.

Selis snorted. "You're in love with that woman."

"No." At her skeptical expression, he gave in and added, "Maybe."

“You’re stupid about women.” After a moment of thought, she added, “You’re stupid about men, too.”

Moon couldn’t argue with that. “I know.”

“She treats you better than Ilane did, at least.”

Moon started to protest, then subsided. Ilane had treated him well. She just hadn’t cared about him beyond his ability to give her what she wanted and please her in bed. At the time, it had been enough, but then he had never known anyone who had actually seen him for what he was. He pointed out, “Jade hasn’t tried to kill me yet.” Despite all the provocation he had given her.

Selis made a noise of grudging agreement. “Just be careful.”

Moon shrugged. That was something else he couldn’t promise.

Chapter Fifteen

They said goodbye to Selis in the mountain city, and flew day and night, stopping to rest as infrequently as possible. The wind was with them and the weather stayed fair, speeding their flight out of the mountains. Once they were over the warmer forests they pushed even harder and didn't stop at all for the last two days. Just before sunset, they reached the valley where the others had taken shelter. While the Fell stench lingered in the direction of the colony, no taint drifted through the grove where the blind lay. Moon was so exhausted he flew through a plume tree while trying to land and reached the ground in an uncontrolled tumble. Ashe sprawled in the moss, Jade dropped through the canopy in an anxious rush, landing on her feet beside him.

"Moon, are you all right?"

He stifled a groan. "Yes. I meant to do that."

He had a few new bruises, but the plume tree's branches were too soft to cause any real damage. He shifted to groundling and nearly collapsed again when he shed the weight of his wings. It was a relief, even when it meant trading them for aching muscles and an encompassing weariness. He staggered unsteadily to his feet.

He caught a scent of Raksura, just before three hunters darted out of the undergrowth. They stood for a heartbeat in frozen shock.

Then the smallest one shouted, "You're back!" He shifted to groundling, turning into a slight boy, and threw himself at Jade to hug her awkwardly.

She returned the hug for a moment, her shoulders tense. "We're back," she said, her voice suddenly thick. "It's all right."

"We're so glad to see you," one of the others said. She tugged at the boy's shirt. "Strike, let go of the queen. Let her go into the blind. Bramble, go find Bone and—"

A violent rustle through the trees interrupted her and then Chime, Balm, and Root dropped to the ground. As all three shifted to groundling, Chime turned triumphantly to Root. "I told you they'd come back!"

"I didn't say they wouldn't," Root protested, and Moon lost the

rest as Chime flung himself into his arms.

Moon stumbled and almost fell under the onslaught, flustered and self-conscious as Chime hugged him. He hadn't expected a greeting like this from anybody. Balm and Root fell on Jade just as enthusiastically, and as more hunters arrived, they all practically tumbled into the blind.

Inside, glowing moss strung from the woven branches gave wan light, and a small rock hearth was piled with stones spelled to give off warmth. Seated near it were Flower, the two teachers, Bead and Blossom, more hunters, and Niran. They all came to their feet with startled exclamations. Flower held her hands out for quiet, staring intently at Jade. "You've got the poison?" she demanded.

"Yes." Jade lifted her pack, pulling out the bag with the flask. "And we know how to make it."

Flower hissed in satisfaction, taking the bag.

"Poison?" Balm turned to her, startled. "What poison?"

"It's the poison that Moon knew of, that keeps Fell from shifting," Jade explained, looking around at the others. "We went to get it from some groundlings."

Ignoring the chorus of questions, Moon looked for Stone, and for a moment thought he was gone. His dark form didn't fill the back half of the chamber; Moon couldn't hear the slow rasp of his breath. Then, back against a partition, he saw a pallet made up of cut branches and woven plume fronds, with someone lying on it in groundling form.

Behind Moon, Bone and more of the hunters pushed through the branches into the blind, greeting Jade warmly, but Moon barely noticed. He went to the pallet and dropped to his knees. Stone's skin was ashen, and big gray-green bruises spread across his face, neck, his chest. Under the edge of his shirt was the seam of a half-healed wound, the skin puckered and raw.

Flower took out the poison flask and opened it to sniff cautiously at the contents. She looked up, telling Moon, "He was able to shift to groundling yesterday, but he's still not recovered. It'll be a few more days, at least."

Stone's eyes were half-open, but when Moon leaned over him, his good eye focused and he took a sharp breath. In a voice weak and grating with pain, he said, "It's you, good. Give me a hand."

Moon got an arm under him and helped him sit up. Stone's grip on him was strong, but he leaned on Moon's shoulder as if that was as far as he could get. He smelled of dried blood and sickness. Flower

said hastily, "Don't let him stand. He thinks he's healed, the stubborn idiot."

Stone cleared his throat. His voice was uneven, and he didn't lift his head from Moon's shoulder. "Did you get it?"

"Yes." Moon frowned down at him. "How'd you know?"

"They said you and Jade went to get help from another court." Stone snorted in derision, then flinched, as if it had pulled at his wounds. "I knew that was useless. When they told me what happened, I figured you'd try for the poison the groundlings used on you."

Jade knelt beside them, touching Stone's shoulder gently. She asked the others, "What about Pearl, and the other Aeriats? Are they watching the colony?"

"Yes. Not that there's been much to watch," Bone told her, sinking down beside the hearth with a weary grunt. The others were settling down, taking seats around the chamber, crowding together, listening anxiously. He added, "We've counted at least five kethel, but we're not certain how many dakti or rulers."

Jade nodded. "What about the rest of the court?" No one answered immediately and her voice tightened. "They're alive?"

Moon waited for the answer, tensing. This can't be for nothing. If we're too late...

Flower had unrolled the leaf with the boiling instructions for the poison; she looked up with a grim expression. "As far as we know."

Someone in the back added bleakly, "As far as we hope."

Jade's spines lifted in agitation. "You haven't been able to get anyone inside the colony?"

"No." Balm's jaw tightened as she admitted the failure. "We could never get anyone in through the water channels under the platform, the way we planned before you left. They keep a kethel lying in the river down there."

Moon slumped, a little relieved. At least they hadn't found proof that the others were all dead.

Chime added, "We even thought of trying to get Niran inside, since he doesn't need to shift, but the more we talked about it..." He turned to Niran with a shrug.

"The more foolish it sounded," Niran finished, sounding ironic. He looked better than Moon would have expected for a groundling living rough in the forest with Raksura. His white hair was tied tightly

back and he wore an oversized silk shirt over his own clothes, probably borrowed from one of the Arbora. “It was getting near the place at all that was the stumbling block, not what one could or couldn’t do once inside.”

“But we have seen the dakti bring in food,” Balm said. “Grasseater carcasses, and melon and roots from our own plantings: that’s food for Arbora and Aeriati, not Fell.”

So what are the Fell eating? Moon thought, sickened, but managed not to say it aloud.

Jade’s jaw tightened, as if the same thought had crossed her mind. She asked, “So there’s been no sign of anyone inside trying to escape?”

Bone lifted his hands, helpless and frustrated, and Moon had the feeling he and the others must have talked of little else while they waited here, debating the question from every angle.

“If no one in the court can shift,” Bone said, “they wouldn’t have any chance to run. The major kethel are always on the terraces and in the river.”

“In short, we don’t know anything,” Chime said with a wince.

Distracted, Flower shook the flask again. “How much of this do we need to make?” she asked. “Moon, how much did they give you?”

Moon thought back to that night with Ilane. Distance and a little revenge had made that memory less painful. “There couldn’t have been much, at first. It was in a small cup, and the odor wasn’t strong. I don’t remember anything after I drank it. It was morning when I started to come to, but I could hardly move. Then they forced some more down my throat.” He looked up to see they were all staring at him. “What?”

Appalled, Blossom said, “It sounds horrible. You lived with these people and they did this to you, just like that?”

Moon didn’t have an answer for her. It had been horrible, but after stealing the poison and scaring the Cordans all to pieces, he didn’t have much to complain about.

“We all thought you went to Star Aster to ask for help,” Balm told Jade. “Pearl sent Vine and me to Wind Sun. We only got back two days ago.”

“I don’t suppose they offered any?” Jade didn’t look particularly hopeful.

“No. It’s as we thought before you left. They said the survivors

would be welcome to take refuge, but they wouldn't send warriors." Balm lifted a hand, frustrated. "They didn't say so in so many words, but it was obvious they thought we brought this on ourselves."

"Yes. We were certain Star Aster would say the same, so we tried for the poison instead." Jade sounded grimly resigned. "And I don't blame Wind Sun. We had no formal alliance, and they're a small court. And they know if they had asked for our help, we would have said no."

There was an uncomfortable moment as everyone absorbed that. In a small voice, one of the younger hunters said, "So we did bring it on ourselves?"

Stone stirred, lifting his head enough to say in a raw croak, "No. Nobody asks for something like this."

Flower stoppered the poison flask and set it aside, saying in exasperation, "Stone, damn you, lie down or you'll never get better."

"I feel fine," Stone insisted faintly, slumping back against Moon's shoulder.

"We can tell," Moon said, making his voice dry to hide his relief. If Stone felt well enough to argue, he couldn't be as weak as he looked.

"Why isn't he in a healing sleep?" Jade asked, moving around to help Moon lower Stone to the pallet again.

"With a consort, that's easier said than done," Flower told her. "He has to cooperate with me, and he won't."

Moon heard a rush of wings outside, like wind through the trees.

"That's Pearl and the others," Bone said, cocking his head to listen.

Moon flicked a quick look at Jade. This could still go badly wrong, if Pearl had changed her mind about their plan to use the poison. She's been here all this time and hasn't come up with any better idea.

A hunter ducked into the blind and said, "The queen's back." He pulled the branches aside and Pearl stepped in. She was still in her winged form, and her expression gave no hint to her mood. Moon caught a glimpse of the other Aeriats behind her, with River pushing forward to get a look into the blind.

Without glancing back at him, Pearl flared her spines to keep him out. She said, coolly, "We need to speak in private."

Still sitting beside Stone, Jade inclined her head. “With the leaders of the Arbora.”

Flower exchanged a look with Bone, and told the others, “The rest of you start collecting this plant. It’s three-leafed purple bow, that grows in and near spiral tree boles. Chime and Blossom, organize everyone into groups. Salt and Strike, make sure nothing eats Niran.”

Niran snorted, as if this was a running joke. He got to his feet, telling Flower, “Thank you for your consideration.”

“Wait.” Jade held Pearl’s gaze. “Send two hunters back to watch the colony. Keep the Aeriats here.”

That was only good sense. Branch might have been the traitor, but Moon still had doubts. And if he wasn’t the traitor, it could be someone else here, especially the Aeriats who had come to the Blue Stone Temple with Pearl.

Pearl’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t question it. She turned her head to tell the Aeriats, “Do as she says. No one else is to leave this grove.”

Flower and Bone stayed where they sat. The other Arbora got up to leave the blind, some casting uneasy glances back. Moon started to get up, and Jade shook her head slightly. He eased back down, not sure if this was a good idea. It seemed a bad time to antagonize Pearl, when they should be focused on how best to get the poison into the Fell. But sitting here for this long had given his exhausted body a chance to stiffen up. He felt heavy, as if he was going to sink right into the earth.

Chime and Balm went last, and reluctantly. Moon heard the other Aeriats outside asking frustrated questions before Balm drove them off.

Pearl waited until the voices faded, then sat down, curling her tail around neatly. She didn’t look at Moon. He thought that was just as well. She said to Jade, “I take it you were successful.”

“We brought some of the poison and the knowledge to make it.” Jade flicked her tail restlessly and added, “We can’t risk anyone going near the colony. If Branch wasn’t the traitor, whoever it is—”

“I did follow that.” Pearl’s voice was acid. “Even if your poison works as it should, there’s still the power that kept the court from shifting. If it forces us into groundling form—”

“Then we’ll fight that way,” Jade finished tightly.

Pearl lifted a brow. “That’s easily said.”

Bone leaned forward. “We’ve got some skinning knives, and

javelins, to use as weapons. If the dakti are sick and forced to shift to groundling, we'll have a chance." He hesitated. "We've sat here for days trying to think of a better plan, or how to seek help. We can't leave the others to the Fell, even if it kills us all."

"He's right." Flower hugged herself, tucking her hands under the sleeves of her smock. "We've discussed it at length, all of us. We won't abandon the rest of the court."

Pearl tapped her claws on the dirt, and added deliberately, "There's something else to consider. All these days, the Fell haven't bothered to search the valleys for us." She fixed her gaze on Jade. "Why is that, do you think?"

Flower and Bone both started to speak, but Jade's voice cut across theirs. "Wait." Watching Pearl, Jade said, "The queen is about to tell us."

Pearl tilted her head. "I think it's because they want something very specific from us, and until now, that something hasn't been here."

Moon felt his skin start to crawl. It's not me, he thought. It couldn't be. This is not my fault.

Jade met her gaze, then let her breath out in a hiss. "It's a possibility." Pearl lifted a brow and Jade added, reluctantly, "Kathras followed us."

Bone frowned, and Flower stared at Jade, blank with surprise. She said, "The ruler who came out to speak to Pearl?"

Jade didn't look at Moon. "He followed us as far as the mountains. Moon killed him, but before he died he said enough to tell us that the Fell thought we were fleeing. The other rulers must have felt his death, seen something of what he saw, at least."

Moon looked down at Stone, keeping his expression still. Maybe she wouldn't have to tell the whole story. Stone was still conscious, and squinting at him suspiciously. That didn't help.

"But how did Kathras follow you?" Flower asked. "By scent? Surely if he was that close..."

Jade spread her hands on the packed earth. "We didn't scent him until we reached the mountains. And he must have started after we left, because he near flew himself to death to catch up with us. A more powerful ruler or group of rulers must have been forcing him on." She shrugged uneasily. "It's as if they have a mentor, whose augury can point them in the right direction. Kathras knew nothing of our plans, or the poison, but he knew which way to fly to find us."

Flower hissed in anger, and rubbed her face. “I don’t understand this. There’s something we’re missing.”

“Are we missing something, Jade?” Pearl asked with deceptive lightness.

Jade hesitated, drawing her claws through the dirt. “There’s one more thing.”

Moon tensed, suddenly cold with dread. She hadn’t said she wouldn’t tell them. He reminded himself he hadn’t done anything wrong, he hadn’t betrayed anyone except himself, turns ago in Saraseil.

Reluctantly, Jade said, “This Fell flight knows Moon. A long time ago, in a groundling city, he killed a ruler they were related to. That’s why Kathras said he followed us.”

Flower and Bone stared at Moon. Stone groaned under his breath. Pearl just looked grimly satisfied.

She’s going to use this against us, Moon thought. He couldn’t let it look like Jade was shielding him. He said, “It was eighteen turns ago, when I didn’t know what I was. I let them catch me, then when I realized I wasn’t one of them, I killed a ruler and escaped.” He was a little startled at how easy it was to tell the story now. “Kathras sounded like he—they—felt betrayed.”

The two Arbora were quiet long enough to painfully stretch Moon’s nerves. Then Flower exchanged a rueful look with Bone, and said, “Well, I know what River would say to that.”

Jade cocked her head, a mild challenge. “Then let’s save the delight of hearing it now.”

“What does Stone say?” Bone asked soberly.

Stone’s eyes were closed now, but he said, “If he’s a Fell ally, he’s doing a bad job of it. He keeps killing them. He killed a bunch of dakti at Sky Copper.” With a grunt, he added, “Said we should eat them.”

“I did not, you sick bastard,” Moon snapped.

Flower shook her head, and the harsh line of Bone’s mouth tugged upward in a reluctant smile. He said, “That’s well enough for now, then.”

“We can talk about this later,” Jade told Pearl. “We need to start work on the poison.”

Pearl stood, looking down at them. "As you say. But we will talk of it." She gave Jade an ironic nod, and walked out of the blind.

Jade twitched her spines and turned away, hissing to herself.

Bone got to his feet, saying, "When we free the court, we can settle all this. Until then—"

"I know," Jade snarled. She shook herself, and added, more softly, "I know."

Bone shook his head and followed Pearl outside.

Flower sighed and gave Moon a wry look. "You're certainly a handful, aren't you?"

He shrugged, defensive and uneasy. "I can't help it."

Jade settled her spines with difficulty, then turned back to face them. "Flower, have you been able to scry anything?"

Flower gave her a glare of pure frustration. "I only get asked that question ten times a day." She carefully tucked the poison flask and the leaf back into the bag. "We know someone told the Fell we were meeting you at the Blue Stone Temple. I've bent my scrying on that, trying to make certain it was Branch. But all I see is an image of the colony."

Jade frowned, thinking it over. "As if the one who actually betrayed us is trapped with the others?"

"Or something." Flower shook her head wearily. "For a while now we've thought something was wrong in the colony, but no matter how hard the mentors looked, we never found any real sign of it. There was nothing solid, nothing but feelings, bad luck, bad omens. I'm starting to wonder." She sighed. "I don't know."

"We'll know more when we get back inside." Jade sounded grimly certain.

"We can hope." Flower pushed to her feet. "Now you two rest while we get this poison started."

Flower slipped out through the woven branches, leaving them alone except for Stone, who was breathing deeply again. Moon could hear the Arbora moving around outside. They talked quietly, with hope and excitement about the plan.

There was a patch of bare dirt at his feet that looked very comfortable, so Moon lay down on it. Jade still sat there, staring grimly at nothing. He reached out to her, tugging on one of her frills. "Sleep."

She growled, but came over to lie beside him, wrapped an arm around his waist, and pulled him against her. Moon tucked his head under her chin. It might have been easier when it was just the two of them, alone in the vast distances of the Three Worlds, but he had missed Chime and Flower and Balm and the Arbora. After a moment, Jade sighed and said, "It's for the best."

Moon knew she meant it was for the best that he had told them about Saraseil. He wasn't so sure. It was something Pearl could use against him, and now that he had decided to stay, that mattered a great deal more. "Will she tell the others?"

He felt her stir uneasily. "Not the Arbora. Not at first." She wove her fingers through his hair. "They'll have to know sometime. It's better if it comes from you."

"I know." And it was painful how much it mattered.

"When this is over, we'll worry about it," she said, unconsciously echoing Bone.

Moon woke surrounded by sleeping Arbora, several of whom were using him to keep their feet warm. Late morning light came through the woven branches of the blind, and Niran rustled around near the hearth.

Moon didn't feel like he had slept very long. He had been dimly aware of the Arbora coming and going all night, as they collected the plant and brought it back to the blind. Just before dawn, some hunters had brought in a couple of kills. Rested just enough to feel hungry again, Moon had crawled out to take his share, then crawled back to the blind. Jade had gone off with Flower at that point, to check on the progress with the poison.

Now he sat up, propping himself on his arms, still feeling bleary and vague. He had discovered something else about Raksura: they weren't meant to fly for days on end without sleeping or eating. He was coming around to the idea that he had been born to do nothing more than lie around in the forest and eat and nap.

Sitting at the hearth, Niran glanced up. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." He had a blanket wrapped around his shoulders and was trying to balance a water gourd in the heating stones. He looked bleary-eyed and vague, too.

"It's all right," Moon said around a yawn. He craned his neck to see Stone, still lying on the pallet. It didn't look as if he had moved, but his breathing was deep and even. "Did you find enough of the plant?"

“Not nearby. We had to go a little further up the valley, but there it was plentiful.” Niran hesitated, as if he found what he was about to say awkward. “I realized I hadn’t—I wanted to thank you, for taking the time to warn my family. If you hadn’t, they would surely have been killed.”

Moon shrugged, a little uncomfortable with the gratitude. It would have been pointlessly cruel not to warn them; there was no reason the Islanders should suffer just because the Raksura were trapped. “Did the Fell find the flying boats?”

“They went right to them.” Niran shook his head, resigned. “They climbed over everything, damaged the decks somewhat, and searched the surrounding forest, but Bone said he didn’t think they looked any further.”

Moon had thought the Fell would surely destroy both boats, but it was hard to tell if the Fell understood how important property could be to groundlings. Since the boats seemed abandoned, the Fell might just have forgotten about them altogether.

“When this is over,” he said, “maybe you can still get them back to the islands.”

Moon had wondered how Niran had been getting along, but if he could casually mention Bone, by far the most frightening Arbora here, then he had probably gotten over his dislike and suspicion.

Niran admitted, “I’ve thought about trying to take one back now, but it seems certain the Fell would notice and pursue me. Even if they didn’t, there’s the danger of storms, and I can’t secure the ship against one alone. Balm said that if possible, after this is over, some of you will help me return.” He took a deep breath. “I hope to find out more about these Fell before I go. If, as you all fear, they have some new power, they could become even more virulent than ever.”

That was what Moon was afraid of. And he wasn’t sure that any amount of warning could help vulnerable groundlings. “At least you could tell your people how to make the poison.”

Niran snorted. “I am practically an expert at it now.” He nodded toward the east wall of the blind. “The others are brewing it over by the stream. Flower thinks it will take at least half a day.”

Moon should go see if they needed any help. He climbed to his feet, carefully stepped over the sleeping bodies of the hunters, and made his way outside.

He pushed through the screen of branches and out into the cool morning air, following the scent of the poison through the trees. He

caught a glimpse of someone moving in the foliage overhead, but assumed it was a warrior or hunter. Then Pearl dropped lightly to the ground.

Caught in groundling form, Moon didn't try to shift; he just stopped, watching her warily. Hunters slept in the blind barely thirty paces away, and he could hear faint sound from ahead, toward the stream, so if she wanted to kill him she had to do it in front of witnesses.

Pearl folded her wings, taking her time about it. With more than a trace of irony, she said, "I admit I'm surprised you returned."

Moon made his expression just a little bored. "If you thought I was lying about the poison, why did you agree to let Jade go with me?"

"I didn't think you were lying," she corrected. "I just didn't believe you'd return to fight for the court. And that was before we found out about your earlier adventure with the Fell."

He had known that was coming. He set his jaw. "It was a long time ago, and it has nothing to do with this." He reminded himself he didn't have to justify anything to her.

She eyed him deliberately. That cold gaze that made him feel as if his skin was inside out. "You deliberately drew their attention. Even the groundlings you were living with would have known better."

Yes, the groundlings had known better, but Moon had been young and half out of his head with fear that he was somehow related to these murdering mindless predators. He knew that now, but hindsight didn't help. "What do you want from me?"

Pearl seemed to find that question grimly amusing. She gave him a long look. "I want to know if you've told us everything."

"I've told Jade everything."

"And she seems to believe you." She flicked her tail thoughtfully. "But she hasn't been foolish enough to take you as consort yet."

"Yes, she did. On the way to the east." As soon as the words were out, Moon cursed himself and thought, That was stupid. He didn't know how it worked, but it had to be Jade's place to tell the court, especially Pearl.

Pearl seemed to freeze for a moment, her expression hardening. Then she looked away with a slight smile that just barely revealed her fangs. "Even if you gave her a clutch, that doesn't make you her consort."

Walk away, Moon told himself, just walk away. He had made a mistake and he didn't need to aggravate it. But he had to know, and he couldn't help himself. "What do you mean?"

Pearl said, "When a queen takes a consort, she puts a marker in his scent. Only other queens can detect it, but it gives you a status in the court that nothing can take away." She looked at him again and laughed. "You should have bargained for that before you bred with her."

Stung, he said, "She doesn't have a clutch." And it wasn't a bargain.

Pearl cocked her head, as if honestly curious. "That's what she told you?"

Moon stood there, unable to speak, furious with himself for letting her do this to him. She's lying. That seemed obvious. To drive you away from Jade. Of course she was lying.

Behind him, two half-asleep hunters stumbled out of the blind. They stopped when they saw Pearl and Moon.

Pearl turned away without another word and moved off through the green shadows toward the stream.

Embarrassed, one of the hunters said, "Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

Moon swallowed his anger. It wasn't exactly an unwelcome interruption.

"It's all right."

He plunged into the undergrowth and went on toward the stream. He reached a clearing where the Arbora had scraped the moss back to bare dirt, but built a canopy of branches and fronds overhead. From the air, the open space would appear to be just another stand of trees. Jade, Flower, Balm, and some of the hunters sat on fallen logs and rocks.

In the center of the cleared space, they had dug a large pit in the forest floor. It was partially covered with tree fronds, and Flower stood over the open side, using a stick to poke dubiously at the dark contents. Waterskins, round river rocks, broken water reeds, and a pile of dark foliage that must be the three-leafed purple bow lay nearby. Steam was rising off the pit, leaking between the fronds; Flower must have used her magic to heat stones, dropping them in to boil the water. The weedy odor of the poison hung damply in the air.

Jade and Balm sat on a fallen log, talking to Bone who, even in

groundling form, looked almost toad-like compared to the more delicate Aeri-at. River and Drift sprawled on the ground nearby, bored and restless. Song, Root, Sand, and the other warriors slept under the tree roots.

Chime sat a little apart, near Flower's pile of ingredients, studying the poison-making instructions. Moon took a seat next to him, and Chime glanced up, then frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, just... tired." Moon self-consciously avoided looking toward Jade. Across the clearing, Pearl stepped out of the ferns. Showing absolutely no interest in Moon, she walked over to sit down near Bone.

Chime grunted and went back to the leaf. "Don't breathe the fumes. If anyone stands too close, it makes them woozy."

No one else seemed to be listening, so Moon asked, "Is it true that queens mark their consorts?"

Chime nodded. "It's something only other queens can scent." He peered at Moon a little uncertainly. "Are you worried about that? I mean, it wouldn't hurt. It just tells other queens that you're taken, so they don't fight over you."

"I just wondered." If Pearl wasn't lying, it meant that Moon had given up his only advantage, that there would be no reason now for the others to stop Pearl from driving him out. He didn't even blame Jade. Not much, anyway. He had refused her gifts, and after that she had asked him for a clutch, not to be her consort. It was just that after hearing about the other queens and consorts, he had assumed it was the same thing.

But it didn't change anything. He had known that he would have to fight Pearl and her allies if he wanted to stay. Now it would be harder. If it's true, he reminded himself.

He glanced up to find Pearl watching him, and looked away, resisting the urge to bare his teeth at her. Then he found himself staring at Chime. Under the bronze of Chime's skin, on his forehead and cheek, there were green-black discolorations, bruises on top of bruises. In the shadows last night, Moon hadn't noticed, but in the daylight it was obvious. "Did you have another bad landing?"

"What? Oh." Chime frowned at the ground, scratching absently at the moss with his heel, as if he had forgotten he was in groundling form and didn't have a claw there. "No."

"Somebody hit you." Moon felt a growl building in his chest. "Pearl?"

Chime snorted. "Pearl doesn't know I'm alive." He twitched uncomfortably under Moon's continued stare, and finally admitted, "It was River."

"Balm didn't help you?" Moon looked across the clearing. He had thought Balm and Chime were friends, at least from the way they had played together in the lake. She sat near Jade, her chin propped on her hand, listening to the others talk. Her expression was glum and her body drooped with exhaustion.

Chime shrugged wearily. "When she's around. But she and Vine were gone to Wind Sun for days, and... I don't want to ask her for help. I don't want them to gang up on her. She's Jade's clutch-mate, and they've always been together, and with Pearl at odds with Jade, Balm's position is hard enough. What are you doing?"

Moon stood and crossed the clearing to stand over River.

River looked up at him with a smile. "Was Chime begging you for help?" It was as if he had overheard their conversation, or been waiting for Moon to notice Chime's bruises.

"You're going to be begging for help." Moon was certain his first mistake at Indigo Cloud had been not beating River insensible at the earliest opportunity. But he had just enough sense left to know it would be better if River attacked him first.

"What do you care?" River shoved himself upright, sneering, leaning forward in challenge. "You're a mongrel solitary, acting like you think you're first consort when you're not even part of this court."

That stung more than River could know. Moon kept his voice even. "I'm still a consort. That's something you'll never have, no matter how many queens you sleep with."

River snarled, flushing a darker copper. "You're the one who came here to hide. You're the one who brought the Fell down on us. They followed you to the mountains thinking you were running away again. They came here for you, because you went to them!"

Moon fell back a step. The whole clearing went silent; even the wind stopped. The hunters exchanged uneasy looks, whispering to each other. Woken by the commotion, the Aeriats were watching, startled and wary. Flower and Bone both stared at Pearl.

Pearl's spines lifted and she snapped, "River. That's enough."

Jade came to her feet. She glanced at Pearl, her expression tight with fury. In a growl, she said, "Moon, leave it. We can't afford a fight now."

Maybe not, but they were going to have one. And if he wasn't her consort, then he had no obligation to listen to her. "Then keep us from shifting."

Jade's eyes went hooded. "Done."

"What?" River looked from Jade to Pearl. Moon saw his eyes narrow when he tried to shift and failed. He glared at Jade, hissing in annoyance.

Moon asked, "Afraid?"

"You're too much of a coward to fight in the air," River began. Moon shut him up with a punch to the face.

Moon didn't know how to have a serious fight as a Raksura without killing or crippling his opponent. But as a groundling, he knew plenty. River staggered back, then surged forward with a snarl, tackling Moon. Moon landed hard on his back but brought a knee up and rolled, throwing River to one side. They both scrambled upright and River, growling in earnest now, ducked a punch and nearly slammed a blow into Moon's throat.

They fought across the clearing, smashing into the undergrowth, slamming each other into trees, sending hunters scrambling away. Then Moon caught River with a hard punch in the gut, and kicked him in the chin when he doubled over.

River dropped in the dirt, tried to get up, but sank back down, panting with effort. Moon leaned over him, grabbing his hair to lift his head up. His voice rough from the blow to his throat, he said, "Talk all you want. But if you want to fight, you fight me."

River bared his teeth, but it was a half-hearted gesture.

Moon dropped him, turned his back, and walked away. He had no idea where he was going, just away from the clearing, away from the stares and accusations. His hands hurt, though he couldn't feel his other bruises yet; Raksuran heads were harder than groundling, so he had had to hit River hard enough to bruise his knuckles.

He was barely past the first stand of trees when Chime caught up with him. Sounding bewildered, Chime said, "Is it true?"

Moon didn't stop, didn't look at him. The hurt tone in Chime's voice just made it all the worse. "Yes. Some of it."

"But you went to the Fell?"

Moon shook his head. "Go ask Flower. She knows."

Chime stopped, and Moon kept walking, weaving away through

the trees, looking for a quiet spot away from the blind.

At least Pearl wasn't holding it in reserve to use against him anymore.

Chapter Sixteen

Moon spent the rest of the morning in a tree near the clearing in his shifted form, hanging upside down by his tail from a branch. The hunters kept watch on him, the way they kept watch on all the Aeriats on Jade's orders, but no one came after him. That was probably for the best, because he was so bitterly angry he couldn't think straight.

He knew the Fell hadn't attacked Indigo Cloud because of him; it didn't make sense. Even if the Fell had shamen that could predict where Moon would be, they had had plenty of time to come after him before this. The Fell had been moving all over the east for the past twenty turns, and so had Moon. And yes, it had been a mistake to go to the Fell in Saraseil, and no one knew that better than him. But if these Fell felt betrayed because Moon had killed the ruler Liheas there after all this time, then that was crazy.

Moon had never faced a ruler before, and he had been younger then and not as strong. He had one chance to escape, and it had been better to wait for Liheas to sleep, even if he had to pretend to believe the lies and let Liheas touch him. And he had no idea why he was trying to justify this to himself. Fell killed groundlings like cattle, tortured them for pleasure, and destroyed their homes; if the Fell didn't want to be killed in return, that was just too damn bad.

Restless, Moon gripped the branch with his tail more tightly, his scales scraping through the bark. He had no idea if Jade still wanted him after this, if she hadn't counted on having to tell the others about what he had done in Saraseil, or their reaction to it. If Pearl was telling the truth and Jade already had a clutch, she didn't need him anymore.

That hurt more than anything.

He knew that Pearl had driven off consorts that had been born into the court because they had belonged to other queens, or because she hadn't wanted to look at them after her own consort had died. He knew she wouldn't hesitate to try to drive him off, if Jade did nothing to stop her. His only option would be to fight, to hurt or kill Raksura he had no real quarrel with, to stay in a place where no one wanted him.

That's if we survive the attack tonight, he reminded himself. They

still needed him for the battle at least.

After that... Jade had said that having seen what a Raksuran court was like, he wouldn't be able to settle anywhere else. She was still wrong, he thought, his anger tinged with that familiar sense of resignation. I wasn't able to settle anywhere else before this, either.

He tried to ignore the traitor voice that whispered, And if this Fell flight is following you, for whatever insane reason of its own? That meant no more groundling camps or cities, either.

When the shadows were lengthening toward afternoon, a hunter came to the base of the tree and said, diffidently, "Moon? They want you to come and look at the poison."

What Moon wanted was to hang in this tree until it was time to go be killed by the Fell. But he dropped to the ground, shifted to his groundling form, and followed her back to the clearing.

The others were gathered there, a cautious distance from the pit. Moon tasted the air and knew why. This close to the liquid, the weedy odor had taken on an intensity that made his stomach want to turn.

He stopped at the edge of the group. The hunters and the Aeriati flicked looks at him, and some tried to unobtrusively sidle away. Chime stood over the pit with Flower, watching her stir the contents. He saw Moon and twitched uneasily, turning his attention back to the poison. Jade turned toward him, but Moon avoided her eyes. Pearl, standing at the opposite side of the pit, ignored him.

Moon didn't see River, who was probably back at the blind, being catered to and sympathized with.

Flower looked up, her face flushed and hot. She saw him and held out one of the nut shells they were using as cups. "Moon, does this color look right? It's changed from purplish to clear, like the sample in the flask."

The group parted for him and he stepped forward, just close enough to see the contents of the cup. It had been night when Ilane had given him the poison, but he would have noticed a dark substance in the normally light green tisane. He nodded.

"Good. Now we have to test it." Flower told the others, "If it needs another boil..."

"Yes, but we can't test it on you," Chime said in frustration. "We'll need you when we enter the colony. Whoever we test it on might not recover in time."

"Yes, I know, but I always test my simples on myself, and..."

Flower took a few steps back and sat down heavily. "I think the fumes are getting to me."

Chime flung his arms in the air, and Jade said, patiently, "Yes, Flower, that's what we've all been trying to tell you."

Balm said, "But we do need to test it. If we put it into the water and nothing happens, there won't be a second chance."

Behind Moon, someone cleared his throat.

"I'll do it."

Moon turned to see the youngest hunter, Strike, who had been the first to greet Jade last night. Strike said, "I want to fight in the battle, but I'm the smallest, so I'm the... most expendable?"

Bone scratched his head, and said reluctantly, "Not expendable, but... You are the smallest, and I'd thought to leave you behind anyway."

Jade grimaced, watching the boy unhappily. Moon wanted to protest, to offer himself, though that made just as little sense as using Flower to test it. But the whole idea of deliberately putting an Arbora at risk, especially a young one, felt wrong down to his bones. He wished they could catch a dakti to test it on, but there was too great a chance that the other Fell might sense what was happening.

Jade said to Strike, "If you're certain. If you're not, tell us now."

Strike twitched his spines, obviously uncomfortable with all the scrutiny, but he said, "I'm certain."

Flower took the cup of poison and poured water into it from a skin. She handed the cup to Strike. "Better sit down."

Strike took a seat on the mossy ground, careful not to spill the clear liquid. He looked down into it, biting his lip. "Should I shift to groundling?"

"Most of the Fell won't be," Bone said, crouching near the boy. "We might as well see what it does."

Jade nodded. "Go ahead, Strike."

The boy took a deep breath and downed the cup in one long gulp. Everyone watched uneasily.

Birds called in the trees, and somewhere on the far side of the stream a treeling squeaked. After a time, when nothing dramatic happened, some of the hunters started to relax, moving away a little to sit down in the dirt.

Chime began, "Maybe it's not—"

Then Strike swayed a little, his eyelids drooping. "I'm really sleepy. Is that supposed to..." Suddenly he shifted to groundling and slumped over.

Bone caught him, easing him to the ground as Flower hurried over. She held a hand in front of Strike's mouth, carefully pushed his eyelids up to look at his pupils, then put her head on his chest to listen to his heart. After a tense moment, she sat up, wiping the sweat off her forehead. "He seems well enough, just deeply asleep."

Moon stepped closer. "Look at his arms."

Bone turned Strike's arm and pushed up the sleeve of his shirt. On the boy's deep copper skin, lines were already appearing, very faint but growing darker, mimicking the scale pattern of his Raksuran form.

It had taken longer to work on Moon, but then he was bigger than Strike. He said, "That's what it did to me. That's how they knew."

Jade looked at Pearl, her spines half-lifted in challenge. "Well?"

Pearl inclined her head, as if conceding a point to Jade. "We'll go at nightfall."

Moon hung around the fringes of the clearing as the others hurried to get ready. Strike was carried back to the blind to recover. Some of the hunters left to take a kill so everyone could eat before the battle. The others organized themselves to transfer the poison to waterskins, a messy and dangerous job. After the first one got woozy and had to stagger off, they sent for Niran and reorganized, with him being the one to fill the skins from the pit. The fumes didn't seem to have any effect on him at all.

The others crouched on the ground nearby. Chime sketched a map of the river and the colony in the dirt. Moon leaned against a tree, just close enough to hear their plans. If they didn't want him there, they could tell him to leave. Chime was saying, "We need to distract the kethel guarding the river, or we won't be able to get close enough to get the poison into the channels that draw up the water."

"We still don't know if we'll be able to shift once we get near the colony," Pearl said, still sounding skeptical of the entire thing.

"We know that," Jade said, her frills ruffled with tension. She turned to Bone.

"Exactly how close were the Arbora to the colony when they realized they couldn't shift?"

Bone frowned, looking around at the others. "What did Blossom say? They were below the first terrace? Or closer?"

Balm stood. "I'll go to the blind and ask her."

Jade waved a distracted assent, and Balm headed out of the clearing.

Moon watched her go, mostly to have something to look at besides Jade. So he saw Balm glance back before she stepped into the undergrowth.

Huh, Moon thought, not sure what it was about that glance that set off a warning. As if Balm had wanted to make sure she wasn't followed. Moon was standing back against the thick trunk of the tree, at an angle, and he didn't think she had seen him watching her.

It seemed unlikely. But there was no point taking chances. He pushed off the tree and picked his way through the ferns after her.

He realized almost immediately that she wasn't walking toward the blind. She moved at an angle to it, to pass it at some distance and wind her way deeper into the forest. She avoided the sentries, the hunters posted in the trees near the blind and the clearing.

Even as he followed her, Moon couldn't believe she was doing what it looked like she was doing. She wouldn't betray Jade, let alone the rest of the court. Not in her right mind, he thought uneasily. There had to be another explanation.

They were perhaps a hundred paces past the blind, where the spiral and plume trees grew close together, linked by vines to form an almost impenetrable canopy overhead. She shifted, half-extending her wings to leap partway up the trunk of a plume tree.

Moon shifted too, sprinting through the undergrowth to catch up with her. He reached the base of the trunk and looked up to see her climbing rapidly; she was trying to get past the canopy to take flight. He still couldn't believe it.

"Balm," he called. "Where are you going?"

Her claws slipped on the wood as she twisted around. She stared down at him and her face was empty of expression, as if she hadn't heard him, couldn't see him.

Moon froze for one startled heartbeat. All right, now I believe it. He scrambled up the trunk after her. She climbed frantically, showering him with fragments of bark. She fought her way past the heavy branches, then jumped, flapping to get height. Right behind her, Moon planted both feet on the trunk and shoved off.

She rose over the trees with strong wing beats but Moon was stronger. He slammed into her from behind and caught her around the

waist. She shrieked in rage, clawing at his arms, but he snapped his wings in and twisted to the side, using his weight to pull her off balance.

She flailed. A buffet from her wing caught him a stunning blow to the head, and they tumbled toward the ground.

They crashed through the leafy branches, and Moon made a desperate grab, catching hold of one. The branch bent under their weight, swinging them into the bole with a brutal thump, but it didn't break. Balm abruptly stopped fighting and pulled her wings in, survival instinct overriding everything else.

Moon kept hold of her, not sure if the fall had shocked her back to her senses enough for her to save herself. He looked down and saw flashes of color through the undergrowth and the lower branches as all the Aeriats and most of the hunters crashed through the forest toward them. Wonderful, Moon thought sourly. This explanation wasn't going to be easy. He picked out a mostly clear area of mossy ground, and dropped.

He extended his wings just enough to control their fall. They landed hard but intact. He let go of Balm and she stumbled away a step, then sat down on the moss, making no attempt to get away. The Aeriats and hunters arrived in a rush, surrounding them, most of them growling, others just baffled. Jade landed in front of Moon, her mane flared, and flung her arms up. "Quiet!" The others went silent. "Moon, what—"

"The Fell did something to her." Moon said it rapidly, staying focused on Jade, trying to get the words out before somebody jumped him. "She was going to them."

Balm looked up, shaking her frills back, staring at him incredulously. "How could you—I was not!"

"They must know we're back, the same way they knew we left," Moon insisted. "Now they're calling her to them to find out why."

The others muttered to each other again. Flower and Chime, at least, watched Balm worriedly. Pearl's expression was completely opaque. River stood beside her, looking confused but vindicated. Struggling to her feet, Balm shouted, "I was not going to the Fell!"

The hard part was that Moon didn't think she had any idea that she was lying. She looked more hurt and angry than anything else.

He said, "Then why didn't you go to the blind like you said? Why didn't you answer me?"

"Quiet, both of you." Jade's growl silenced the whole group

again. She stepped forward, catching Moon's wrist. He flinched, almost pulling away, but she was looking at the claw marks on his arms. Balm had torn into him hard enough to pierce the tough skin between his scales, leaving long scratches deep enough to sting. Jade looked at Balm, at her golden scales, unmarked.

Balm stared down at her claws as if she had no idea how Moon's blood had gotten there. Jade asked quietly, "Where were you going, Balm?"

"I was—" Balm took a sharp breath, as if she couldn't finish the sentence and didn't know why. Her anger gave way to confusion and she shook her head. "I was just going to scout."

"You don't know where you were going," Moon said, driving the point home. If she would admit it, maybe it would help break whatever hold the Fell had on her.

"I was going to scout!" Balm snarled.

Jade watched Balm carefully. "You said you were going to the blind to speak to Blossom. And I told all the Aeriats to stay on the ground until we left for the attack."

Balm spread her hands, helpless and frustrated. "I know that, but I wasn't going far."

As an explanation, it wasn't much, and Moon saw the doubt in Jade's eyes. He said, "It's not her fault. She doesn't know they've done this to her."

Pearl turned to Flower, sounding thoughtful. "Is that possible? That she could be under the Fell's power without knowing it?"

"They do it to groundlings," Moon said in exasperation. "It doesn't look like this; it's much easier to tell. The groundlings do whatever the Fell want, and they don't know why."

Jade snapped, "Moon, quiet."

Moon shut up, unwillingly. At least they seemed willing to believe him.

"It's possible," Flower said, her eyes narrowed in speculation. "Balm has no reason to betray us."

"Of course I don't!" Balm looked ready to weep.

"Anymore than Branch did," Flower finished quietly.

Everyone was silent, watching Balm uneasily. Then River said with bitter satisfaction, "I told you it wasn't Branch."

The last place Moon wanted to be was on River's side, but he was

right. All the evidence against Branch could also be leveled at Balm. She had the same opportunities to slip away from the colony as Branch had. She had known they were going to the Golden Isles, known about the meeting at the Blue Stone Temple, known that flying boats had come back with them, but not how many. And she had known that Moon and Jade had flown toward the east, but hadn't known they had gone for the poison until last night.

Flower folded her arms, still speculative. "Balm, will you let me see through your eyes?"

What? Moon thought, startled, but everyone else seemed to know what she meant. Balm looked around at them all. "Yes, I've nothing to hide."

Flower nodded. "We'll do it now. Come back to the blind."

"I'm sorry," Moon said to Jade, though he knew there was no help for it. It would have been better not to expose what had happened to Balm in front of the whole group—Moon knew that better than anybody—but that hadn't been possible.

Jade shook her head, took Balm's wrist and led her away after Flower and Pearl.

Moon followed with the others. The hunters spread out, but the Aeriats still pointedly surrounded him. He couldn't keep his spines from flaring in response. It was mildly gratifying when they backed off a little, even River and Drift.

Moon found himself walking next to Chime, though he wasn't sure if Chime had meant for it to happen or if it was just an accident. Moon had to ask, "Flower can see thoughts?"

"No, mentors can't do that." Chime frowned at the ground. "But she can see if there's anything in Balm's head that isn't supposed to be there. It's hard to describe. You look into someone's eyes, past the surface, and you can see colors, and interpret them." He added bitterly, "I did it once, before I turned into an Aeriats. It's not easy, but Flower is very strong."

They reached the blind, and a hiss from Bone sent most of the hunters scattering back to their watch positions. Niran waited at the entrance, a couple of waterskins slung over his shoulder.

"What happened?" he asked, looking around at all of them.

"It's a long story," Chime told him, nervously. "Wait out here for now."

Niran grimaced in annoyance but turned to go back to the poison

clearing.

Jade had already led Balm into the blind. Moon ducked under the branches and followed the others inside. In the main area, Stone still lay on the pallet, apparently deeply unconscious. Strike, his skin now completely mottled by the poison, curled up next to him. Stone must have been awake at some point, because he had moved his hand to rest on the boy's shoulder.

Balm shifted to groundling and sat down by the hearth, as the others found places out of the way. She told Flower, "I'm ready."

Then Pearl said, "Moon first."

Moon hissed at her. Pearl tilted her head, staring at him coldly. He felt a pressure grow in his chest and behind his eyes, the pressure to shift to groundling. He resisted, too angry to give in.

It could have gone on for a while, Pearl refusing to give up and Moon trembling on the edge of shifting until he collapsed from exhaustion. But, sounding mortally exasperated, Jade said, "Moon, just do it. This won't hurt you, and it'll prove you aren't under any Fell influence."

He had to admit it sounded rational when she put it that way. His voice grating with the effort of resisting Pearl, he said, "Will Flower be able to do both of us?"

"Don't worry about me," Flower told him impatiently. "Now come on."

Moon shifted to groundling just as his legs went weak, and he sat down hard on the bare dirt. Still glaring up at Pearl, he said, "Go ahead."

The other Aeriats relaxed, and Pearl looked away. She tried to seem unaffected, but her stiff spines betrayed the effort of trying to force him to shift. He was bitterly glad to see it.

Flower knelt in front of him and tugged her smock into a more comfortable arrangement. "Now, just be still." She put her hands on his face, a light touch. Her skin felt cool and dry. Moon waited, defensive and impatient and wondering why helping these people had ever seemed like a good idea. After a moment, she said, "Moon, stop fighting me."

"I'm not fighting you," he said, gritting his teeth. If I was fighting you, we'd all know it.

Flower gave him a hard stare. "If you keep it up, I won't have enough strength left to look into Balm."

Moon hissed in frustration. He wasn't aware of resisting her and had no idea how to stop. "I don't know what to do."

"He's stalling," River said. "He's deliberately—"

Jade snarled at him. "River, shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you."

Vine, the biggest male warrior, and a couple of others growled in agreement; apparently River was getting on their nerves, too. River looked at Pearl for help. Pearl just stared him down, and River unwillingly subsided.

Focused on Moon, Flower ignored the others. In a soothing voice, she said, "Just relax. Look into my eyes, think about something else."

He looked into her eyes, dark brown like most of the Arbora's, the edges rimmed with green and gold. All Moon could think about was that if she saw anything that wasn't supposed to be there, the Aeriats would kill him. Or the bleak future he faced, living alone in a tree somewhere, if he survived the battle with the Fell.

Then he blinked, realizing he had lost a moment. Flower was getting to her feet. She ruffled his hair and told the others, "Clear as the day."

Moon pulled away, twitching uneasily. It would have been less strange if he felt something, if some trace of the intrusion lingered. Fighting the urge to huddle in on himself, he looked up, but the others were all watching Balm. She struggled to keep her expression calm, but she looked strained and anxious.

Flower sat in front of her. Smiling reassuringly, she put her hands on Balm's face, gently tilting her head back.

At first it didn't look any different from what Flower had done to Moon. Then Flower's eyes started to change, to turn silver and opaque, the way they had in the Blue Stone Temple. The others stirred uneasily, and Moon was unwillingly fascinated.

Suddenly Flower jerked back from Balm, sitting back on the dirt with a thump. She gasped, "It's true."

Jade hissed, her claws coming out. "The Fell? They're controlling her?"

Flower nodded. "Their taint is in her mind. And I saw something, on the queens' level of the colony." The silver sheen slowly faded from her eyes, making Moon's skin creep.

"No," Balm protested, horrified. "I'd know. Wouldn't I know?"

“This is strong, stronger than I’ve seen before.” Flower bared her teeth. “I couldn’t find the thing that was causing us harm, because it wasn’t here. It was somewhere else.”

Jade dropped down beside her, saying urgently, “Flower, what do you mean? What did you see on the queens’ level?”

“It’s a Fell—I’m not sure what kind. Like a ruler, but not.” She made an impatient gesture. “All I have is a hint of color from its mind. I’ll have to see it in the flesh before I can say. But it’s been watching us for turns. I saw the colony through it.”

“This was the thing causing sickness in the colony?” Pearl demanded. “How?”

Flower looked up, her face flushed. “This Fell flight has been watching us through this creature.”

“That’s not possible,” River said, sounding offended by the possibility. He looked around at the others. “It can’t be... We’ve never heard of that before.”

“Just because we’ve never heard of it before doesn’t make it impossible,” Chime said. He wrapped his arms around himself, looking deeply worried. “And we’ve known—everyone knows—the rulers can share their memories. They can see through the dakti, maybe the kethel too.”

And speak through the dakti, Moon thought, remembering what he and Stone had seen at Sky Copper. Thinking of that, it suddenly seemed a lot less unlikely.

“But there was no Fell in the colony for a ruler to share memories with,” Bone said, his voice thoughtful rather than protesting. “You mean this thing just thought about the colony and saw us, heard us?”

“Not very well,” Flower admitted, “Or the Fell wouldn’t have needed to get inside Balm’s mind.” She winced. “It must have been like a mentor’s vision, just enough to give them the general idea of what we were doing.”

Jade shook her head, appalled. “And it made us sick, made clutches die.”

Flower let her breath out in an angry hiss. “The concentrated attention of a flight of Fell was directed on us. The Fell ruin everything they touch; that’s not just willful destruction. Their magic carries a taint, even if they don’t intend it. After turns of focusing on us, the taint... affected us.”

Unexpectedly, Pearl said, "It makes sense." She didn't even look surprised. "If there had been anything physical inside the colony, something the Fell had managed to put there, we would have found it by now." She shook her head, the tips of her fangs showing. "We looked hard enough."

Jade nodded reluctant agreement. She asked Flower, "Is this the creature that has a queen's power over the court, that kept them from shifting to fight or escape?"

"It could be." Flower turned to her. "If it can watch us from a distance, it could have other powers." She shook her head, frustrated. "I have to find out what manner of creature this is, where it came from. If it's a new kind of Fell."

"That we can find out later." Jade's gaze turned cold. "For now, we know we have to kill this thing."

Pearl said deliberately, "After we put the poison in the water and it's had time to work, the Aeriat can fly to the top of the colony. If this creature is on the queens' level, we can find it and kill it."

Bone sounded dubious. "That's if you can keep your wings long enough to reach the top of the colony."

Jade shook her frills impatiently. "It's our best chance. And if killing this thing means we can shift inside the colony again—"

"Then we'll have that advantage," Pearl said, her expression grim. "If not, so be it."

Balm had listened to them all, stunned and sick. "Why did they choose me? Was it something I did?"

"Maybe it wasn't only you," Vine muttered uneasily. He was the one who had been sent to Wind Sun with Balm. The fact that he had spent that time alone with her, with no idea she was affected this way, must have been shocking to him. "They could have caught any warrior who ever left the colony alone. Flower will have to look into all of us."

No one looked happy about that prospect. But Chime said, "Balm's the only one who's tried to leave since we found out about the poison. If there was anyone else, they could have easily gotten away in the confusion when Moon was stopping her." He looked at Balm, wincing in sympathy. "And if the Fell were watching us, knew things about us, they may have picked her because they saw she was close to Jade."

"I'll still have to check all the warriors," Flower said, sounding grim at the prospect. "But if the Fell did this to more than one or two,

it might have come to light in a mentor's augury. They may not have wanted to risk it."

"But can you make it stop?" Balm asked Flower desperately. "Make the Fell let go of me?"

Flower shook her head reluctantly, and spread her hands. "I've never had to do that before."

Balm turned to Moon. "Did the groundlings have a way to make this stop? To get the Fell taint out of their minds?"

"I don't—" Fell usually killed the groundlings they took this way when they were of no further use. He had no idea what might happen to survivors—if any. But he didn't want Balm, or the others, to get the idea that death was her only option. The only thing he could think of was to buy time until they could talk to someone who might know, like Stone or Delin. "I think it went away when the Fell who did it died." Maybe that was even true.

Jade knelt in front of Balm, taking her hands. "In that case," she said, her voice hard and fierce, "we'll just have to kill every Fell we find, to make certain we get the right one."

The others finished forming the plan, such as it was, and there was nothing to do but wait until sunset. Moon's nerves still itched and he needed to be alone for a time. He slipped out of the blind, looking for some tree roots to hide under.

He heard someone come out after him, and Jade's voice said, "Moon, wait."

He kept moving until she added, annoyed, "Moon, don't make me catch you."

He stopped, feeling tension in a tight band across his shoulders. "I'm not leaving. I'll be with you when you attack the Fell."

Jade halted just behind him. "If you hadn't caught Balm... There was no way she could reach the colony without us realizing what she'd done. The Fell would have known there was no use sending her back. They would have kept her."

"I know." Balm would have told them about the poison, and the Fell would have done to her whatever they were doing to the rest of the court. He thought of his only full day at the colony, when Balm had directed them toward the plain with the statues as a good place to hunt, and how they had caught a scent of Fell. He wondered now if she had gone there alone at some point in the past, for privacy or to explore, if that was where the Fell had caught her.

Growling with impatience, Jade took his arm and pulled him around to face her. "What is it? Pearl shouldn't have told River about what you did in the groundling city, I know. But the others would have had to hear about it eventually."

Moon hesitated. He didn't want to ask because he didn't want to hear the answer. Not knowing at least allowed some room for hope. But he made himself say, "Pearl said you had a clutch."

"What?" Jade stared, then stepped back, her eyes narrowed. "Of course she did." She folded her arms, tapping her claws. "She's lying."

Moon looked past her left shoulder. This was the other reason not to ask. Her denial didn't help at all; Pearl's lie was too insidious, there was no way to know the truth. "All right."

Her whole body went stiff with anger. "You don't trust me."

There were a number of things he could have said, but what came out was, "I wish I did."

Her spines ruffled and she hissed, turned away, and stamped back toward the blind.

Chapter Seventeen

At sunset, Moon, his wings tightly folded, crawled on his belly through the grass toward the river. He hoped the dakti were asleep. He was going to have enough to worry about with the major kethel.

Moon had volunteered for this part of the plan, and no one had argued about it. It only made sense; if he did it wrong, he had the best chance of being able to fly fast enough to get away from the kethel.

Bone, Chime, and most of the hunters waited in the forest, on a hill where they had a good view of this side of the colony. Jade, Flower, and some of the Aeriats were further down the bank, near the terraced fields and a second set of channels for the irrigation system. Pearl and the other Aeriats were on the far side of the colony, ready to come in from that direction.

Bead and Blossom stayed behind in the blind and, with Niran's help, looked after Stone and Strike. Two older hunters, Knife and Spice, had been left behind to help restrain Balm if the Fell tried to use their hold on her again. She had been anxious and miserable the rest of the afternoon, but hadn't shown any further signs of being under their control. Moon hoped that knowing about it now gave her some ability to resist. Flower had looked into the other warriors, but no one else had shown any sign of Fell influence.

Moon had only been on the fringes of the discussion, but everybody seemed to have a different idea as to what the survivors should do if the attack failed and the combatants were all killed. They agreed that whatever happened, Stone would be ragingly angry when he woke and discovered that he had missed it.

Moon reached the bank about a hundred paces downstream from where the colony's stone platform stretched across the river. In the high grass near the water's edge, he risked lifting his head to get a look at the colony. This side was already in shadow, framed against blue sky fading into yellow and orange as the sun set past the forested hills. The light of glow moss still shone from the openings up and down the pyramid's wall, throwing yellow reflections down onto the dark surface of the water. It looked oddly normal, but then the moss would glow for a long time without help from a mentor. He couldn't hear anything, except for the occasional cackle of a dakti. He hoped

the place wasn't a charnel house.

Moon slipped into the shallow water. According to the Arboras' careful scouting, a kethel lay in the water at the base of the platform, in the gap that allowed the river to flow under the structure. It had obviously been posted to keep any Raksura from swimming under the platform and entering the colony through the openings there. Fortunately, the smaller channels that fed the water system were on the far ends of the platform, and not as difficult to get to.

The trick was to attract the kethel's attention enough to get it to move, but not enough to make it tear the riverbed apart looking for intruders. It would have been safer to do this from the bank, but Moon didn't want to risk the kethel leaving the water to search for him.

He took a deep breath, sunk down, and swam underwater to the middle of the river. He surfaced behind a rock, hooking his claws on it as the current pulled at him. The air was heavy with Fell stench so he couldn't scent the individual kethel, but its presence had fouled the water, lacing it with a taste like rotted meat.

Hoping the Arbora were ready, Moon lifted one foot above the surface and brought it down sharply, making a distinct splash.

There was no response, no movement from the colony, just the faint whisper of wind in the trees. Moon gritted his teeth and forced himself to wait, counting heartbeats. Then he splashed again.

He felt the water move first, the wave as the kethel heaved its body up. Moon couldn't risk a look but the creature must have stood to stare down the length of the river. Moon sunk down under the water again and let go of the rock, allowing the current to carry him downstream a short distance. Then he kicked the surface.

He felt the vibrations as the kethel stalked forward. That's done it, Moon thought and, still underwater, swam for the bank. He huddled in the rocks, surfacing just enough to breathe. The kethel paced downstream, nearly to the point of Moon's first splash. It stood for a long time, then growled, a low grumble of irritation, and turned back to the colony.

Using the noise of the creature's movement as cover, Moon slung himself out of the water and scrambled up the grassy bank into the brush. Once in the shelter of the trees, he shook the water off his scales, shivering in relief. The poison should be in the river now, if the Arbora had managed to pour it in while the kethel was distracted, and it would have been flowing right toward him. I'd rather face the kethel than the poison, he thought.

Moon slipped back through the forest up to the low hill where the Arbora waited. Heavily cloaked with trees and ferns, it made a good vantage point to overlook the colony. Moon ghosted quietly through the foliage, passing the Arbora hidden in the grass, who acknowledged him with quiet clicks.

He found Chime and Bone crouched behind a tree and stretched out next to them. "Did they do it?" Moon whispered. If they hadn't, the plan was stuck, because there was no way the kethel would fall for that trick again.

"Yes," Bone answered. He jerked his head toward two Arbora, nearly invisible behind a bush. "Salt and Bramble got right up under the edge of the platform and poured it into the fountain channels."

"They said the smell disappeared once it was in the water," Chime said. "So maybe the Fell won't realize it's there."

That was a relief. "Good." Moon relaxed into the grass. Now they just had to wait. Flower had said that it wouldn't take long for the poison to spread into all the colony's fountains and pools. The dakti and kethel would probably drink before going to sleep, so it shouldn't be long before most were affected.

He was just settling comfortably into the moss when the kethel burst out of the water, shaking its head frantically. Startled, Moon sat up to see better.

"What's this?" Chime said, anxious.

The kethel slung itself onto the bank, and flailed in the brush, the trees waving wildly as their trunks cracked and split under its claws. It thrashed twice more, then collapsed, sliding back down the muddy bank into the river.

Bone hissed in admiration. "That was the poison?"

"It had to be." Moon eased forward, trying to see. The kethel lay on its back, one leg twisted at an odd angle, dark fluid leaking from its mouth.

"It didn't do that to Strike," Bramble whispered from somewhere behind them, sounding awed.

"Strike's not a Fell," Moon reminded him.

His voice tense with excitement, Chime whispered, "The current forms a pool right under the colony, and the kethel was lying in it. It must have gotten a big dose of whatever poison didn't get drawn up

the channels.”

Moon squinted, making out movement on the platform. Several dakti came out of the lower entrances and flew down over the terraces to the riverbank. The Arbora twitched in quiet excitement, whispering to each other.

The dakti clustered around the kethel's body. Moon couldn't quite see what they were doing. They seemed to be poking around the corpse, maybe trying to decide what had killed it. He cocked his head, listening hard, and heard flesh tearing. That can't be... Oh, that's perfect. He leaned down to whisper to the others, "They're eating it."

Chime stared, and Bone muttered, "That's typical of them."

They listened to ripping and crunching sounds as the dakti tore at the kethel's body. With no warning, another kethel appeared on the platform; it must have walked out of the colony and then shifted. It flew down and landed in the water, scattering the dakti as it sniffed at the corpse. Moon held his breath. If the kethel somehow detected the poison...

The kethel tore a huge bite out of the corpse's belly, chewing it with apparent satisfaction. Then it spoke to the dakti, a low rumble that Moon couldn't make out. It turned away from the corpse and Moon suppressed a snarl of disappointment. But instead of leaving the body, the dakti tore chunks off and leapt into the air to carry the meat back into the colony. More dakti came out to help tear the corpse apart, while the kethel climbed down the bank and walked into the water, moving upstream to the overhanging terrace. There, it slid down under the surface, taking the dead kethel's place at guard duty.

Bone stirred impatiently. "The poison will be either in the channels up inside the colony or washed away downriver."

"It ate the poisoned kethel's belly," Chime pointed out. "Just wait."

Finally, the dakti had transported most of the corpse inside, and the colony grew quiet again. Moon felt the pull of each passing moment. He reminded himself that if the Fell were eating kethel tonight, it might mean that they weren't eating Raksura. It also might mean that they had finished off all the Raksura days ago, but for the moment he could hope otherwise.

Near the platform the river bubbled and thrashed. Then the kethel lying under the water suddenly broke the surface, drifting limply.

"There we go," Moon whispered, easing to his feet. If eating from

the poisoned corpse had been enough to kill a kethel, it was enough to kill the dakti.

Bone told Bramble, "Tell the others to signal the queens."

As Moon turned to creep back down the hill, one of the Arbora made a sound, a call that blended into the distant cries of the nightbirds. Following Moon, Chime whispered, "It's frightening that this was the easy part."

Moon and Chime met Jade, Song, Vine, and Sand at the edge of the forest.

"Careful," Flower whispered, sinking down into the high grass with Bone and the other hunters. For once, she was in her Arbora form, and the pure white of her scales made it harder for her to hide.

Jade led the way swiftly down through the terraced plantings. On the far side of the river, Moon caught a flash of gold as Pearl and the rest of the Aeriats approached the colony from that side. Two queens, nine warriors, and me, Moon thought. He hoped that was enough.

They meant to stay on the ground until they were as close to the colony as possible. Everyone had agreed that the force that had kept the court from shifting seemed to have only been in effect inside the colony itself, and not the outer terraces. But if that had changed, it would be better to find out while on the ground rather than in the air. They all had knives and short spears borrowed from the hunters to use when they were forced to shift, though Moon had no idea how good the Aeriats, used to fighting with their claws, would be with the weapons.

The colony was still quiet. No dakti had come out to see about the second dead kethel, another good sign. Jade paused at the moss-covered stone platform that crossed the river. There was no ground entrance in the wall facing this side, and fewer openings in the levels above, which was why they had chosen it. She glanced back at Moon and the others, saying in a low voice, "Everyone all right?"

Moon nodded. He didn't feel any impulse to shift to groundling. Chime whispered, "So far," and the others murmured agreement.

Jade pointed to the ledge marking the pyramid's highest level and the square opening there. Pearl's group would be heading for a similar entrance on the same level, but on the opposite face of the structure. "Go quickly," Jade whispered, then crouched to leap into the air.

Moon followed her, a few hard wing beats taking him up to the right ledge. He landed a moment after Jade and hooked his claws into a chink between the stones. Chime landed beside him; Song, Vine, and

Sand lighted further along the ledge.

He didn't hear Pearl and the other Aeriats, but saw Root duck around the far corner, wave at Jade, and duck back.

"Right," Jade said under her breath, and climbed through the entrance. Moon slipped in after her, Chime and the others on his heels.

Inside was a small room with heavily carved walls, with images of giant groundlings in heavy armor glaring down at them. Jade had already reached the next doorway, which opened into a wide stairwell. Glowing moss had been knocked down and lay strewn on the steps, still giving off enough light to show balconies in the walls, all hung with the big sleeping baskets. Water ran down from a spout high in the wall, collecting at the bottom of the chamber in a pool with floating flowers. Personal possessions were tumbled everywhere, silk blankets and cushions, torn clothing, broken baskets. Behind Moon, Song hissed softly in dismay.

Jade stepped out onto the landing, and paused to taste the air. Moon couldn't smell anything but Fell stench, couldn't hear anything but the trickle of water. Jade glanced back at him, mouthing the words, "You feel anything?"

Moon shook his head. Whatever force had stopped the court from shifting, it wasn't working on them yet.

They made their way down the well, dropping from platform to platform. Jade stopped at a window in the wall and ducked to peer through it. Moon looked over her shoulder.

It opened onto a broad ledge above a large chamber, the same one where the court had gathered on Moon's first full day at the colony. It was lit by fading glow moss, and the stone platforms across the back were strewn with furs and cushions. A dozen or more dakti crouched near those platforms, picking at a carcass, gnawing bones. Jade's spines lifted, and she nudged Moon's arm, pointing to one of the dakti.

It sat a little apart from the others and, at first, he thought it was deformed. But the odd, smooth shape of its back showed that it was missing wings. A Fell without wings? He hadn't thought that was possible. It looked like an Arbora, short and heavily built, except its scales were black, with the heavier plates of a dakti. Whatever it was, it had to be the creature Flower had seen through Balm. There couldn't be two strange new Fell invading the colony. I hope, he thought.

Then, on a landing below, a dakti ducked out of a doorway. It stared up at them, aghast, for a heartbeat, then opened its jaws to shriek.

Jade launched herself down the stairwell and landed on the dakti, crushing it before it managed more than a squawk. Moon leapt after her, landing on the platform just above her.

Then Jade suddenly twitched, her spines flaring in alarm, and shifted to Arbora. An instant later, Moon's claws vanished and he was suddenly in groundling form. He swallowed back a yell, dropping to a crouch to keep from falling. On the platform above him, Song and Vine landed awkwardly, and Chime crashed into a sleeping basket; they all shifted into groundling form. Moon tried to shift back to Raksura, just in case it was still possible. He felt a pressure in his chest, behind his eyes, and nothing happened. This is almost as bad as the poison, he thought, shoving to his feet. At least he still had his clothes, and the long bone javelin borrowed from the hunters.

Jade shook herself, recovering from the shock, and ducked forward into the doorway the dakti had come through. Moon jumped down behind her.

In the big chamber, the cluster of startled dakti leapt up, hissing, to charge at them. Jade blocked the doorway, and the dakti hesitated, unwilling to attack a Raksuran queen even in Arbora form. One conquered its fear enough to lunge at her, and Moon dropped into a crouch, leaning under her arm to stab at it with the javelin. It jerked back, shrieking, but he didn't think he had hurt it. Oh, we could be in trouble here, Moon thought, ducking away from the creature's flailing claws as Jade held the others off. Fighting Fell as a groundling was going to be even less fun than it had always looked.

One dakti bounced up to the window above the ledge, flinging itself through into the stairwell and into Song and Chime. Song grabbed its wing and jumped off the platform onto the steps, using her groundling weight to yank the creature out of the air. Chime scrambled after her, swinging at it with his javelin. Vine grabbed a loose stone from a platform and whacked it in the head.

That only took three of us, Moon thought sourly, as Sand braced himself at the window to try to repel the other dakti. This isn't going to work.

Then Pearl and the other Aeriats burst in through the doorway on the opposite side of the chamber. The dakti scattered to face the new threat. Pearl pounced on one, ripping its head off, and River hooked one down out of the air. A heartbeat later, all the Aeriats were

suddenly groundlings. River staggered and nearly fell; Root, in mid-leap, did fall. Moon looked at the wingless dakti, and saw it staring intently at Pearl, just as she shifted to Arbora.

“It is that thing; it’s doing this,” he told Jade.

“Get it,” Jade snarled to Moon, and dove through the doorway. Chime and the others followed her, and Moon used the distraction to head for the strange dakti.

Even as an Arbora, Pearl didn’t hesitate, bounding forward to slam another dakti into the wall. Jade lunged in to pull a dakti off Root, and Moon dodged around the fight.

The strange creature saw him coming and ran, scampering up the steps to the platform. Moon bolted after it. The creature scrambled away from him, huddling in on itself. It moaned and lifted its head, and he stepped back abruptly, feeling a cold chill. Its eyes had an avid expression completely at odds with its terrified posture.

Then it lunged at him. Moon swung the javelin like a club, slamming it across the creature’s head. He dodged a wild blow as it fell across the steps, then slammed the point into its chest.

Its scales resisted the sharpened bone, and Moon leaned all his weight on it to drive it in. Gurgling, the creature clawed at him, tearing at his shirt and scratching his arms as he grimly forced the javelin further into its chest.

Vine ran up, grabbed the upper part of the javelin, and threw his weight on it as well. Moon felt the creature’s scales give way with a crack. Dark blood gushed from the wound. Moon saw the intelligence fade from the creature’s eyes, leaving them blank and gray.

The pressure in his chest lifted so abruptly that Moon stumbled down the steps. In relief, he shifted back to Raksura. Vine stepped back and shifted too, calling to the others, “That’s it! We can shift!”

Bloody and ragged from the brief fight, the others all shifted and pounced on the last of the confused dakti before they could flee.

As the last of the dakti died, Jade shifted to her winged form and jumped up to the platform to land beside Moon. She said, “Song, Vine, go out and signal the Arbora.” The plan was for the Arbora to climb up the outside of the colony, gather here, and then they would all fight their way down through the structure together.

As Vine turned to leap for the skylight, Jade moved forward, staring down at the strange dakti. “This has to be the thing Flower saw, but what is it?”

The others gathered around as Pearl stepped up onto the platform. She circled the dead creature, her lips curling in disgust. “A new kind of Fell? It looks oddly like an Arbora.”

Chime reached down toward it. Then his spines flared and he jerked his hand back. Sounding sick, he said, “It’s a mentor.”

Jade shook her head, staring at him. “It can’t be. It looks—”

“Like a Fell. I think it’s a crossbreed, part Fell, part Raksura.” Chime’s face was bleak. “They weren’t lying when they said they wanted to join with us.”

Moon looked down at the thing, appalled. He had been hoping that the “joining” was just a Fell lie. Root eased forward to sniff at the creature; Sand grabbed his spines, dragging him back.

Chime continued, “They must have done it before. Captured Arbora, forced them to mate with rulers, until they produced a mentor.” He waved a hand frantically. “They didn’t need a Fell in the colony to see us through its eyes. This thing could see us because it was part of us. Not our court, not our bloodline, but still Raksura, still a mentor.”

The others stirred uneasily. Pearl hissed, sounding more angry than anything else. “How did it force us to shift? That’s a queen’s power, not a mentor’s. And even another Raksuran queen couldn’t force Jade and I to shift, no matter how old or powerful she was.”

Chime shook his head, baffled. “Because it’s a crossbreed? I don’t know. It had to know we were there before it could force us to shift, though. That’s like a queen’s power.”

“It sees through the other dakti,” Moon said, the realization turning his blood cold. “When that one saw us in the stairwell—”

“This creature knew we were there,” Jade finished. She gave the mentor-dakti a kick with one clawed foot, as if she had to suppress the urge to tear the body apart. “That must be how it forced the court to shift. The kethel dropped the dakti on the colony, they ran through, finding everyone, and this creature used its power on them.”

“We just have to hope it’s the only one,” Moon said, and looked up to see everyone staring at him. “Well, we do,” he added defensively.

Song and Vine leapt back in through the skylight overhead. A moment later Bone, Flower, and the other Arbora swarmed in through the doorways. A few of the hunters carried extra waterskins filled with poison.

Still in her Arbora form, Flower climbed up to the platform to stand beside Chime, staring down at the dead crossbreed.

“It’s worse than you thought,” Chime told her. Flower hissed and crouched to poke at the creature.

The other Arbora gathered around the platform, watching Pearl. Pearl’s spines flared, and she said, “Work your way down. Kill them all. Find our court.”

Bone growled, and the hunters turned nearly as one, flowing toward the doorway out to the big central stairwell. Moon leapt over their heads to land in front, beating Bone down the passage and diving down the stairs.

The Arbora bounded after him, climbing along the walls and ceiling. Moon met a dakti, surprising it as he whipped around a corner onto a landing. He tore its head off before it could scream. The stairs divided at this point, splitting off into a wide passage that led to more Aeriats bowers and then a second stairwell. Jade leapt down to land beside him, just as Bone caught up to them. She said, “We’ll take the other side.”

Moon nodded. They had to move fast. “Look for the kethel.”

Jade turned for the passage, hissing for the Aeriats to follow her. They flashed by in a multi-colored swarm of wings and tails. Moon turned down the stairs with Bone and the hunters.

They reached the next landing down, where three passages split off. One led forward into the pyramid’s central shaft, another led to the right, turning narrow, concealing the room it opened into. Moon heard the bubble of fountains and, over the sick stench of Fell, he caught the scent of the poison. And a faint sound of movement, something like hissing, breathing.

He went down the right hand passage in a bound, the hunters right behind him. The doorway at the end opened into a long chamber with an open-roofed court in the center. It was full of dead and dying dakti.

They sprawled everywhere, smaller and shriveled in death. Chunks of bloody meat, already attracting buzzing insects, lay among them. Kethel meat, Moon thought, with some satisfaction. That’s what they get for eating each other. The stench was unbelievable.

Behind him, a startled hunter asked, “Is that one of us?” In the nearest pile of dakti was a body, no scales, the naked skin light-colored but mottled with green and black. The hunter reached down for it, meaning to pull it away from the pile.

Moon lunged in and grabbed his arm before he could touch it. “No, it’s a dakti!”

“He’s right.” Bone shoved forward, giving the white form a kick. “That’s the dakti’s other form. Like our groundling forms, but—” The shifted dakti writhed away from him, unable to stand but still snarling defiance, barring fangs. It had harsh features, flat empty eyes, dark hair matted and ragged. “—not much like.” Bone disemboweled the creature with one swipe of his claws.

Someone in the back said, “It’s killing them, not just making them sleep like it did Strike. And why did only one of them shift?”

“Only one so far,” someone else answered. “Maybe that one got less than the others.”

“Flower always did make strong simples,” Bone said, turning away from the dying dakti. “And there’s power in anything made by a mentor.”

It’s probably lucky we didn’t kill Strike, Moon thought. But then Flower hadn’t been thinking about killing Raksura when she brewed the poison. “Keep moving.” He turned back to the passage.

Out in the stairwell he saw flashes of gold, copper, and blue as Aeriat dropped through the central well; a moment later dakti screamed in chorus. Moon snarled, wanting to join the fight, but he kept to Jade’s instructions and led the way down the stairs to the next level.

This was the fourth level up from the river terraces, and the landing led to several doorways and passages. Moving rapidly from one to the other, Moon found nothing but empty rooms with storage baskets and cushions tumbled around, smashed pottery, and broken tools.

Then with a little cry of horror, a hunter jerked back from a doorway. Moon leapt forward and grabbed the hunter’s spines to drag him out of the way, expecting a flood of dakti or the missing kethel. But the room was empty, except for bundles strewn across the floor.

Then he saw the bodies, some wrapped in blood-stained clothing.

He stepped inside, feeling the dirty floor grit under his claws. Arbora started to push in after him, and he snarled, “Stay out there!” It could be a trap. The room was empty except for the corpses, the carved figures of the ancient groundlings staring dispassionately down from the stone beams. There were no other doorways, but the dakti could swarm in through the air shafts.

The Arbora scrambled back, obeying without argument. Moon

moved forward, tasting the air, but all he could smell was Fell and death. We're too late, he thought, sick at heart. He knew there was nothing he could have done; he and Jade had returned as fast as they could. And the Fell didn't come to Indigo Cloud for you, he reminded himself. That didn't help.

But as he stepped further into the room, he saw this death wasn't new. From the smell of rot, these people must have died days ago, not long after the colony had been taken. There were at least forty or fifty bodies, mostly Arbora, male and female, and a few taller, slimmer shapes that had to be Aeriats. Most were in groundling form, only a few in Raksuran. All were twisted and broken, skin or hide slashed by claws. He heard a step behind him and glanced back, baring his fangs, but it was Bone. The other hunters still held the stairwell.

Moon looked back down at the bodies again and recognized a face. It was Shell, one of the soldiers who had tried to chase him out of the colony his first day here, when Chime had hurried to defend him. Shell was in groundling form, ripped from chin to crotch, his eyes still open. His hands were curled claw-like, dark residue caught under his fingernails, in his teeth.

Moon looked away. The Fell didn't eat them. But they ate the Raksura at Sky Copper. He had a very vivid recollection of the dakti with the arm clutched in its jaws. And Stone had found few intact bodies when he had searched the mound. It doesn't make sense.

Bone circled the rows of bodies. His voice thick with misery, he said, "These are mostly soldiers. They must have fought." Then he froze, looking down, hissing in dismay.

Moon moved to his side, and found himself staring down at Petal's face. She was in her groundling form, gray and rigid in death.

He looked up. Bone's spines rippled in fury.

"We're wasting time," Moon said, and turned for the doorway.

On the next level down they found a score of dakti trying to flee down a passage, flushed out of hiding by the Aeriats on the other side of the building. Moon helped corner them, then let the Arbora thoroughly tear them apart before he made them head down the stairs again.

On the level below, Moon hissed for silence. He could hear something below, a flurry of movement, hissing. He took the last turn, coming down to where the stairs ended in a junction of two large passages. One led out to a big room with an opening to the outside, letting in cool air. But he sensed movement down the left hand

passage, a lot of movement.

“That’s the soldiers and hunters’ bowers,” Bone whispered.

That meant the hall would have many tall doorways opening to small, curtained-off rooms, some at floor level and some above it. If it followed the same plan as the other bower halls, the rooms were just stone partitions, not completely enclosed. Moon asked, “Air shafts in from the outside walls?”

“Yes!” Bone turned, signaling half the hunters to head toward to the outside opening.

Moon went down the passage to the bowers. Through the doorway ahead he could see a partition wall, and not much else. The hissing had stopped, and he was certain the dakti knew the Raksura were here.

Moon swung up to the top of the doorway and glanced inside: the hall was full of dakti, most clinging to the ceiling carvings, ready to drop on whoever walked in. They saw him and shrieked in rage.

Moon leapt into the hall and shot across the ceiling, hooking his claws into the carvings, tossing startled dakti off right and left. From their screams of alarm, they had been prepared for Arbora, but not an Aeriati. The floor was already littered with pale, mottled bodies: poisoned dakti shifted to groundling. This flight must be huge. Without the poison’s help, the Raksura would have been easily overwhelmed.

The Arbora followed Moon in a wave. More dropped down through the air shafts from outside. A dakti landed on Moon’s back and was plucked off by an Arbora before he could even reach for it.

Moon reached the far end of the hall and saw the dakti falling back, grouping around one of the bowers, protecting something inside. Renewed shrieks from the dakti made him glance back. The Aeriati had arrived, dropping down the air shafts. They must have heard the commotion and come around the outside of the colony. “Here!” he shouted. He was certain the dakti were protecting a ruler.

Moon leapt down onto the top of the wall, knocking the dakti away. Bone charged up the stairs, ripping into the dakti as those below crammed into the doorway, trying to block him. Moon still couldn’t see the ruler. Two large basket beds blocked his view of part of the bower. He dropped down into it, close to the wall, and something surged out from under the nearest bed.

It was the groundling form of a kethel, big, muscular and naked. Its face was boney, eyes set back deep in their sockets, fanged teeth

long and yellow. Moon ducked the wild punch aimed at his head and came up slashing, ripping open the kethel's belly. It still attacked, grabbing at his shoulders, lunging in to bite him. But his scales deflected its teeth. He got an arm around its throat and threw his weight down to snap its neck.

The kethel collapsed. Moon jumped over it and tore the beds aside. A ruler shot up at him and, unlike the kethel, it wasn't in groundling form. It knocked Moon backwards, flat on his back.

It gripped his throat, its weight pinning his legs. Desperately, he clawed at its hands, trying to get a knee up to push it off. It was too strong, it had him pinned. He could feel its claws about to pierce his scales. He saw a flash of gold and indigo from above, then Pearl landed on the ruler, straddling it. She gripped the bony crest behind its head and reached around to grab its chin with her claws and twist. The ruler's eyes turned stark with terror, right before they went blank with death.

Pearl tossed the body away, slamming it into the bower's wall, then leapt up and out of the chamber.

Moon bounced to his feet, looking around for the next Fell, but everything in the bower was dead. He swung up to the top of the partition wall for a view of the hall. Dead dakti, whole and in pieces, lay everywhere. Warriors and hunters tore through the bowers searching for more. Jade stood in the center of the hall, tail lashing, waiting for the others to finish the search.

Chime leapt up onto the wall next to Moon. He was panting and covered with Fell blood. Wild-eyed, he said, "That's two kethel dead outside and one in here. There's still at least two left."

Clinging to the stone beams above, Vine said, "This flight must have been huge! I've never seen so many dakti—"

"Back here!" Bone shouted from somewhere toward the back of the hall. "Here!"

Moon jumped to the next bower, then the next, following Bone's voice, as the Aeriats and the hunters scuttled across the walls, or leapt after him. He reached the last partition to see Bone standing at an archway that led into the next hall of bowers. He jumped down to Bone's side. Then he saw what filled the next hall, and just stood there, staring.

The room was packed with large globes of a mottled, glassy substance, each as big as a small house, crammed in between the bowers. Sacs. The sacs that kethel made, to attach to their bodies and

carry dakti. They filled the entire hall.

Jade pushed through into the doorway to stand beside Moon and Bone. The others, hunters and Aeriats, crowded behind them, some hanging from the top of the archway to see inside. Everyone was silent with shock.

“Why would they keep dakti in here like this?” Jade said under her breath. She stepped cautiously up to the nearest sac. She leaned close to it, peering into the mottled surface. Then she jerked back with a hiss, slashing it open with her claws.

The mass split open and a dozen limp figures tumbled out, sprawling on the stone floor. They were Arbora and a couple of Aeriats, all in groundling form, their clothes stained, stinking of unwashed skin and fear sweat. But not rot. Jade dropped to her knees and rolled the nearest Arbora over to touch his face. She cried out, “They’re alive!”

Bone and the others surged forward. Moon caught hold of the side of the archway to keep from being carried along. As they all ran to the other sacs, Pearl leapt up to the wall of a bower, snarling at them, “Look first! Make certain it’s Raksura inside, not dakti!”

Then someone cried out in anguished relief, “The clutches! The clutches are in this one, back here!”

It went straight through Moon’s heart, and he couldn’t watch anymore. He turned back to the outer chamber, just in case there were any stray dakti survivors creeping up behind them. The others’ raw emotion made him uncomfortable, and he still felt painfully like an outsider. That’s because you are an outsider, he reminded himself. The only thing that had changed was that now he didn’t want to be one any more.

Then from outside, through the air shafts, he heard a whoosh of big wings. “Kethel!” he yelled, darting to the nearest shaft. He scrambled up to reach an outside ledge. Framed against the dying sun, one kethel was already in the air, and a second launched itself up from the terrace below. A cluster of dakti rode the first, huddled down to cling to its back. Moon thought the larger figure just behind the armored crest might be a ruler. Good, they’re leaving, he thought. As the second kethel banked away from the colony, he saw the gray, bulbous mass attached to its chest. It was carrying a sac.

It could be full of dakti, but Moon had to make certain. He jumped into the air, hard flaps carrying him up after the kethel. He got up under its belly, but couldn’t get a good look at the sac from this angle. If it’s full of dakti, you’re going to feel stupid, he thought, and

shot up to hook his claws into the kethel's belly plates.

He clawed his way up toward the creature's chest and swung forward, close to the sac, peering through the cloudy surface. He saw shapes, then realized he was looking at someone in groundling form, crammed against the wall of the sac, at least two other forms behind her.

Her eyes opened. Moon stared, horrified. He couldn't slash the sac open—if they were all Arbora, they would fall to their deaths, and he could only catch one.

Then the kethel's big, clawed hand came at him and he twisted away, leaping off and snapping his wings in. He slipped through the creature's fingers, falling in an uncontrolled tumble. He extended his wings, catching himself and craning his neck to see the kethel.

Both creatures flew hard, shooting swiftly away over the valley. Cursing to himself, Moon circled back toward the colony.

Jade and Pearl stood on the ledge outside the air shaft. Jade called, "Moon, what was it? What did you see?"

Moon landed on the ledge above her, leaning down. "It had one of the sacs, with Arbora trapped inside!"

Jade turned to Pearl. Pearl's spines flared out, and she said, "Go after them; take the Aeriats!"

Jade shouted back into the colony, calling the Aeriats, and Moon took to the air, chasing the kethel.

Chapter Eighteen

The two kethel flew at their best speed, their shapes etched against the night sky, so fast only Stone could have caught up with them. Flying full out, Moon could just keep them in sight.

He looked back to see the warriors already dropping back. No matter how hard they flew, the younger and smaller fell the farthest behind. This isn't going to work, Moon thought desperately. He slowed to fly level with Jade, circling her to shout, "You stay with them. I'll follow the kethel!"

Jade circled with him, looking back at the warriors, grimacing in despair. The Aeriats were strung out in a long line, with only Vine and River coming close to keeping up. "Are you sure? If they stop—"

"This could be what they want. If you don't stay in a group, they could send dakti back to swarm the stragglers." The danger would just increase as the night wore on.

Jade growled in reluctant agreement. "Leave us markers so we won't lose your trail."

"Wait, wait!" That was Chime, flying full out to catch up with them. He slowed into a circle, panting, and said, "Here, take this, just in case you can use it."

It was one of the waterskins of poison. Chime held it out and Moon caught it, slinging it over his shoulder.

"Be careful!" Jade called. As she and Chime banked to turn back, Moon flew ahead to catch up with the kethel.

All too soon he lost sight of the others, and it was just him and the kethel, alone under the vault of stars. The kethel slowed their pace a little, and Moon hung back as far as he dared, both to conserve his strength and to stay at the far end of their range of vision. He hoped that if they looked back, he would just blend in to the night sky.

They headed mostly northwest, with no abrupt changes of direction. Moon stopped briefly at likely outcrops to pile up stones pointing the way. He hoped that was what Jade had meant when she

said to leave markers; he had no idea what other kind of markers to leave. Whenever he landed, he noticed how awkwardly heavy the waterskin of poison was, and he didn't think he would be able to use it. If the rulers killed at the colony hadn't managed to pass on a warning about poisoned water, then the kethel certainly would. But he might find something to do with it. It was too valuable a weapon to just abandon.

As dawn broke, the forested valleys came to an abrupt halt, giving way to a flat plain of yellow grass crossed by shallow streams and dotted with trees. There's no cover, Moon thought, cursing the Fell. None. A baby treeling couldn't hide in that. They had probably chosen this path deliberately, knowing that any pursuers would be completely exposed.

The grass was sparse, barely knee-high. Trees as slender as rods stood as much as two hundred paces high. Their canopies fanned out like round sunshades, the light green leaves providing little barrier to the eyes of anything flying over. The rocky streams were nearly flat too, barely a few fingers deep, the water glittering in the sunlight. It would be a perfect hunting ground for the major kethel.

Moon landed long enough to make another arrow out of rocks, pointing the way across the plain.

By late evening, the stench of Fell was heavy on the wind, and Moon thought the kethel must be close to their destination. The streams winding through the plain had coalesced into a broad river running toward a series of ridges and the foot of a distant escarpment. Moon spotted some hopping grasseaters near the river and made a snap decision to take one. He had no idea how much longer the kethel meant to fly, and he couldn't keep up this pace on an empty stomach.

He stooped on a hopper before the herd knew he was there, killed it, and ate nearly fast enough to make himself sick. Then he flew to the river to drink and quickly wash the blood off. There, he discovered the banks were dark with what looked like metal-mud. Hah, finally, a little luck. Moon scraped his claws through the mud to make certain, then dropped and rolled in it, wincing at the metallic odor, extending his wings to thoroughly coat his whole body.

Once it dried on his scales, the odor would disguise his natural scent. The fact that it also burned easily was worrisome, though he would have to pass close to a flame for the dried mud to catch. Though he suspected that once he found the kethel's destination, accidentally burning to death would be the least of his worries.

He quickly made two more rock arrows, one pointing in the

direction the kethel had taken and the other toward his mud-wallow; he hoped the others found it and got the idea.

He took flight and, after a burst of speed, came within sight of the kethel again. He settled in for a long steady haul.

The sun set, and the kethel continued more than halfway through the night until they reached the rocky outline of the escarpment. Moon had been flying so long by that point that he stared in shock when the kethel suddenly banked and circled for a landing.

Moon dropped toward the ground, seeking cover in the rocky hills on this side of the river. He landed amid boulders and old rock falls covering a steep hillside, under the partial cover of tall spreading trees, and crept up to the top to try to see where the kethel had gone.

Moon's namesake had waned to nothing and the only light came from the stars. It was too dark to make out much but the vague shape of the escarpment. That whole side of the cliff was in deep shadow. But the kethel had settled somewhere over there, and the stench of Fell was intense. This had to be more than just a rest stop. Watching intently, Moon caught flickers of movement and thought it must be dakti, flying above the cliffs. The kethel met up with another flight, or the rest of their own flight. He hesitated, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn't fly over there blind. He hissed in frustration, and dumped the heavy waterskin of poison off his shoulder.

Moon shifted to groundling form to conserve his strength; the dried metal-mud settled on his skin and clothes, gritty and itching. Then he tucked himself into a hollow in the rock, and waited, watching and dozing off and on.

Finally the sky lightened with the leading edge of dawn, and the shadows gradually turned from dark to gray, revealing the valley and the cliff face.

The river curved there, gleaming silver in its sandy bed. At the base of the cliff was the ruin of a groundling city. A great city, with two vast levels of pillared porticos that flanked arched gateways, leading back into the rock. Above, the cliff face, hundreds of paces high, swelled out like a ball.

No, I'm looking at it wrong, Moon thought, as the light grew brighter. That's not part of the cliff. It was two cities, not one. A groundling ruin with a giant Dwei hive built on top of it.

Squinting, he could see the difference between the golden stone of the cliffs and the gold-tinged dust covering the rough material of the hive. The groundling city had been built at the entrance to a

gorge. The groundlings must have carved out the gorge for more room, perhaps bent the flow of the river away from it, and used the rock to build their city. Turns and turns later, with the groundlings gone and the city fallen to ruin, the Dwei had constructed their hive, using the sides of the gorge to brace the enormous structure, and sitting it firmly atop the ruined city, filling the gorge from one side to the other.

The Dwei were skylings, something like insects, something like lizards. Moon didn't know much about them except that they didn't seem to prey on groundlings or other races. They made their hives with a substance that looked like clay, secreted out of their bodies somehow. He didn't think they would voluntarily share their hive with Fell, or anything else. The Fell must have kept the hive and ate the Dwei.

Dakti circled above the top of the hive, and one dropped down to vanish somewhere inside it. There had to be an entrance up there; that had to be where the kethel had gone. Trying to follow them would be instant suicide.

Moon had never been inside a Dwei hive before, but he had seen drawings. The inside of the hive should be hollow, with plenty of room for the kethel to fly and climb around in their shifted forms. But the gates and doorways he could see in the groundling city's long portico looked like they were meant for normal, Moon-sized groundlings. If the hallways and corridors further inside were comparable, the kethel wouldn't be able to fit down there unless they shifted to groundling. The ruin didn't have to be attached to the hive, but it might be, and if he could find the way in before Jade and the others arrived, it would save time and argument.

He needed to see how far into the gorge the city extended. If there was a way in through the back somewhere, it would be easier to avoid the circling dakti sentries. And if he got killed in the attempt, he needed to leave some sort of message for the others.

His markers and the scent of the metal-mud would point the way here. This was a good, concealed vantage point, and it was unlikely that the dakti would stumble on it; they didn't seem to be scouting any distance from the hive. Of course, they wanted us to follow them, and they're hoping we'll attack like crazy idiots, he thought sourly, picking out a good flat rock face. The only thing they could do was attack like sane idiots, and hope that worked.

He scratched out a brief message in Altanic, explaining what he was about to do. If he found he couldn't approach the hive from cover, he would come back here to wait for the others.

Moon shifted back to Raksura, shouldered the waterskin, and started down the slope.

Moon flew the long way around, careful to stay out of sight of the hive, and stopped upriver to renew his coating of metal-mud. Then he found the other end of the gorge, which wound snake-like through the bulk of the escarpment, a long distance from the Dwei hive. He followed it back, staying cautiously low, finding the ruins of small, roofless stone buildings with crumbling walls, the remains of a road, and stairways carved into the cliffs.

Finally, as the gorge curved again, Moon found the beginning of the main ruin. He landed, blending into the shadows at the base of a rock fall. This could work, he thought, encouraged.

A sloping wall blocked the gorge from one cliff to the other, carved with worn figures of giant grasseaters. It had a gate, blocked by piles of old rubble and guarded only by two slim obelisks. Beyond it was a long, mostly-intact colonnade, and a maze of crumbling walls. Over the top of the cliff, he could just see the rounded dome of the Dwei hive where it sat further up the gorge. Dakti still lazily circled above it.

Moon slipped forward, moving quickly over the dusty ground, between the obelisks and over the rubble of the gate.

The partly-intact roof of the colonnade provided cover from anything flying overhead. The shade sheltered sand-colored lizards and green beetles that fled as he ran past. The colonnade ended in a long rambling building, still mostly roofed over, and he went from it to the next, and the next. Among the ruins were empty pools and fountains choked with sand, broken statues, and thornvines shrouding empty archways. The inner walls were painted with scenes of barges moving along a broad river, and desert plains, all in delicate faded colors. Some rooms were still packed with large clay storage jars, each taller than he was. At any other time, this place would have been a pleasure to explore, to poke into all its secrets.

Soon he passed through the sandy corridors of buildings darkened by the shadow of the hive. Then he reached an archway blocked by a solid wall of dusty gold-brown stone. He ran his hand over it and realized he had found the outer wall of the hive. The texture of the material was grainy, rubbery in places and stiff, almost brittle in others. All right, you got here, now look for a way in, he told himself.

He worked his way back through the building, finding steps that led down to what might have been a large, open plaza at one time, littered with broken stone columns. Now the hive sat atop it, forming

a heavy roof over the paved space. They must have used this building to brace the hive, Moon thought, moving forward cautiously.

Small holes punctured the bottom of the hive, but he could see a much larger one ahead, maybe twenty paces across. Dim daylight fell through it to illuminate a circle of the worn paving.

That opening might be for ventilation, or to give access to the ruin as an escape route. Or to dump trash, because as he drew closer he could see the section of plaza beneath it was littered with big shells.

He reached one and crouched to examine it. It was curved and nearly four paces across, the iridescent surfaces scarred with recent claw marks.

Oh. I think I found the Dwei.

Moon had only seen Dwei from a distance, but he knew they had shells like these across their backs. He sniffed at the inside and winced. It smelled of recently dead flesh, and it had been scraped out with claws. Unless the Dwei ate their own dead and cast the remnants away like trash, which was possible but not likely, then the Fell had cleaned out the hive.

From somewhere far above his head, up inside the shaft, he heard a low, reverberating grumble. Moon froze until it faded into silence, then carefully eased back away from the pile of shells. Somewhere at the top of that shaft, a kethel lay sleeping.

So that's not going to work, Moon thought, retreating quietly. But if there was one shaft up into the hive, there might be others.

After a little searching, he found one toward the far side of the plaza. No daylight fell through, but no Dwei shells littered the stone beneath it either. Moon jumped up to catch the edge and hoisted himself up.

The climb was much longer than he had expected, and also uncomfortable, with the waterskin bumping heavily against his side. The shaft led up a long distance, maybe a fourth of the way into the hive, then finally opened into a dark chamber.

Moon crawled out of the shaft to crouch on the edge, all his senses alert. The cave-like space was empty of anything but dust, and smelled of Fell mixed with a musty acrid odor. Dark openings in the far wall led deeper into the hive's interior. He stood and crossed the floor to investigate.

Halfway across his foot slipped, and he stumbled on a suddenly uneven surface. It was a grate, a big one, made of the same material as

the rest of the hive. Moon crouched and tasted the air. The acrid odor was stronger here.

Then a large clawed hand shot up through the grate to wrap around his lower leg. Moon nearly yelled in panic, managed to turn it into a low hiss, and tried to wrench free. The hand yanked at him, hard enough to drag him down between the bars. The waterskin of poison slipped off his shoulder. Desperate, he scrambled for purchase on the bar, but the weight dragging him down increased a hundredfold and his claws slipped off the slick surface.

He fell down into a dark space and landed hard on rubbery ground. Something slammed down top of him, a big hand pinning his chest. A creature with a large round head with bulbous, multi-faceted eyes loomed over him. Its skin was dull green, with a soft slick texture.

A deep, raspy voice from somewhere to the left said, "What is it?"

"It's a Fell," another voice replied.

"I'm not a Fell!" Moon glared up at the creature looming over him. They were speaking something close to Kedaic, and he answered in that language. "I'm a Raksura, a consort. Look at the back of my head!"

There was a startled pause. His eyes adjusted, and he could see they were all around him, looming shapes. One said, "There are Raksura to the south."

"Still shifters, still dangerous," another replied.

"It smells strange," someone else added.

"You stink, too," Moon said, suppressing a snarl. They meant the metal-mud, but at the moment it was adding insult to injury.

Then the first voice said, "Let it up."

The creature let go of him, and Moon rolled away, getting to his feet. He looked around, but there was nowhere to go.

The big chamber was full of the creatures. They were all taller and broader than he was, with heavy iridescent shells across their backs. Their wings were thin and fine, nearly translucent, and folded back along their bodies. Moon rubbed his chest where the creature had pinned him. They were strong, too. "You're Dwei?"

The one that seemed to be the leader loomed over him, demanding, "Did you see others? Others like us?"

"What?" Then he remembered the shells. "I saw shells, down

below in the groundling city. The Fell ate what was in them and threw them down into the ruin.”

It jerked back as if Moon had struck it, then turned away. A noise rose up from the others, like wood rattling, that resolved into a raspy groan. The sound conveyed dismay, disbelief, grief. It made Moon’s scales ripple uneasily.

Still facing away from him, the leader said, “Every two days, they took five of us away. They said they took them elsewhere, that if we did not resist, we would see them again.”

In the sense that eventually you’d all end up dead, Moon thought, swallowing down a hiss. The Fell were using the Dwei as a convenient food source while the flight stayed here. Some of the dakti could be left to fend for themselves or eat each other, but the kethel and the rulers had to feed at regular intervals. It made it even stranger that they hadn’t done this to the Raksura at Indigo Cloud, that they had left even the dead intact. But this was typically Fell behavior, dangling hope the same way they did to their groundling prey. He just said, “They lie.” The Dwei groaned again, more faintly this time, pain and grim acceptance. “What is this place?”

The leader didn’t answer, but one of the others, he wasn’t sure which, said hesitantly, “We kept our crops here, the dorgali and matra we grew in the cliff tunnels. The Fell forced us in here and blocked the door. They only come to take some of us away.”

The leader swung back around, staring accusingly down at Moon again. “Why are you here?”

He didn’t see any reason not to answer. “They attacked our colony. We drove them off, but they took some of our people. I followed them here.”

One of the others held up the waterskin. The leader said, “What is this?”

Moon hesitated, but what were they going to do with it, tell the Fell?

“It’s poison. It only works on Fell.” He wasn’t going to tell them it worked on Raksura, just in case they decided a test was necessary. “It makes them sick, keeps them from shifting.”

“That doesn’t exist.” The leader looked at the waterskin. “No one has heard of this.”

“It exists,” Moon said. “Groundlings made it.”

With deep skepticism, it said, “And the Fell drink it.”

“No.” Moon held onto his patience. “The groundlings drank it and the Fellate them, and died. That was the only way they knew to make it work. We put it in the water in our colony.” He then admitted, “I can’t use it that way here. The rulers would have passed on a warning about poisoned water before they died.”

The leader blinked slowly, milky membranes sliding up to cover its eyes, then sliding down again. “You killed rulers with it?”

“And kethel and dakti. I saw a kethel drink the water and die. Another kethel ate its corpse and died.” He couldn’t read any emotion in the Dwei’s faces, couldn’t tell if they believed him or not. “Show me where the door is. I’ll go up through the grate and let you out.” It would be easier to find where the Arbora were kept with a lot of angry Dwei rampaging through the hive.

Someone in the back said, “The door is sealed only with a stone, but a kethel guards it.”

That didn’t sound encouraging, but Moon wasn’t ready to give up the idea of a massive distraction that would let him get further up into the hive. “Maybe I could find a way to—”

Something moved in the chamber above. Moon went still. He heard the faint clicking of dakti climbing across the grate. The Dwei made that sound again, the rattling groan. The leader cut them off with a sharp clack of its jaws. Then it called up toward the grate, “The Raksura is here!”

Moon stared at it, incredulous. “No!” He scrambled back, hissing, but the Dwei surrounded him. He made a wild leap, trying to reach the wall, but hands grabbed his legs, yanking him down again. Thrashing wildly, he clawed at their hands, flared his spines. His claws tore their thick skin, but they slammed him down to the ground. Pinned face down, heavy Dwei hands on his back, he growled, “Are you stupid? You think they’ll let you go for this?”

He could already hear grating stone from the far end of the chamber; the kethel must be moving the rock away from the entrance. The Dwei in front of him moved away, clearing a path for the kethel. The leader leaned over him, saying in a raspy whisper, “We know they will not.”

The floor vibrated as the kethel entered the chamber. Blood from the Dwei that he had scratched dripped on Moon’s back; it was clear and smelled like jasmine. Past their legs, he caught a glimpse of the kethel, its dark armor streaked with sand, lowering its head to menace the Dwei with its horns. The Dwei scattered away, releasing Moon, but as he pushed himself up, the kethel shot out a hand and grabbed

him.

Moon hissed in furious terror, digging claws into the finger that was like an iron band across his chest. The kethel stared down at him, eyes dark with malice, and Moon knew it meant to eat him right here. He bitterly promised himself to do as much damage on the way down its gullet as possible. Suddenly, pain shot up his back, his neck, snapping his head back. He yelled, heard his voice drop and change as the pain washed over him and he shifted to groundling.

The kethel dropped him, and Moon landed in an awkward sprawl, no chance to catch himself. Panting, he rolled over, suddenly hyperaware of the cool damp air clinging to his clothes and his far more vulnerable groundling skin. He braced shaky arms to lever himself up. It was the same force the mentor-dakti at the colony had used, but far more violent. They've got another one here, he thought, looking up blearily. A ruler, still armored in Fell form, now stood beside the kethel. It seemed smaller and younger than Kathras, but no less dangerous.

The ruler tilted its head. "A consort. Just what we wanted." He hissed out an order in the Fell language; Moon had heard it before but it had never sounded so close to Raksuran, as if he could understand it if he just listened hard enough.

A score of dakti raced around the kethel. Moon snarled, flailing away, but they swarmed him. He kicked one, managed to smash its kneecap, then got slammed back to the ground, three or four on top of him. After a second stunning clout to the head, the world swung out of focus.

The dakti lifted him up above their heads, their claws caught in his clothes, his hair, scraping at his neck, at his back where his shirt was pushed up. The oily texture of their hands on his groundling skin made him want to scratch himself bloody, fight until they killed him. He forced himself to stay limp, to play dead, and keep his eyes slitted.

They carried him out of the chamber, and he could hear the grating sound as the kethel rolled the rock back into place. It was dark. He couldn't see anything but a ridged roof overhead. He knew they were going up, through a tunnel or passage that went up in long spirals. He memorized the route as best he could.

Finally they passed into a place with fresher air and daylight. Moon let his head flop to one side, and saw one wall of the passage was open to a vast space, lit by wan daylight falling from somewhere high overhead. It had to be the open center well of the hive.

Then the dakti stopped. He caught a glimpse of a round opening

in the floor, right before the dakti flung him down into it. He fell a short distance, struck the rubbery ground, and rolled to his hands and knees, prepared to be swarmed again.

The dakti had dropped him into a shadowy chamber, light falling through long horizontal slits in the far wall. He looked up to see an opening high in the ceiling, set up into a short shaft. The dakti crouched around it and pulled some kind of translucent cover into place, sealing the opening. He looked around the chamber, and caught startled movement in the shadows. He froze, tasting the air. He scented frightened Raksura. Frightened Raksura other than me, he thought. "Who's here?"

Someone said suspiciously, "Who are you?"

Before he could answer, a female voice said, "It's Moon, the solitary—the consort Stone brought." Arbora in groundling form edged into the faint light, watching him warily: four females, two males, all young enough to be barely out of adolescence. Their clothes were dirty and ragged, their hair lank from little access to water.

With breathless hope, another one asked, "Is Stone here?"

"No." At least you've found them, and they're alive, Moon told himself. It didn't feel like much of an accomplishment considering he didn't see any way he could get them out of here. He got to his feet, moving away to see more of the chamber. "They only took six of you?"

"Yes," the first woman answered. She had skin the color of dark honey, curly bronze-colored hair, and she was beautiful, even past the dirt and the fatigue. "They brought us here in a sac. We were the only ones in it. They let us out when we got here, then shoved us into this room." She added, "I'm Heart, and that's Gift, Needle, and Dream." She nodded to the other females, then to the two males, "And Snap and Merit. They're all teachers, and Merit and I are mentors."

"Not that it's done us much good," Merit said, sounding rueful. "None of us can even shift. We don't know how they're doing that."

"How'd you get here?" Snap demanded, still watching Moon suspiciously.

"I followed the kethel." He stopped, staring at them for a moment. They were all beautiful, their skin every shade from warm brown to coppery red to light amber. They were all more than a head shorter than Moon, but they were strong and well-proportioned. All young, all healthy, and two of them mentors. They picked them for breeding stock, he thought uneasily. The Fell still meant to make more

crossbreeds. Unable to keep the whole colony, they had probably meant to take all the young Arbora, leaving the older adults and the sterile warriors behind, but they hadn't had time. "Are you all right? They didn't do anything?"

"Not yet." Heart looked up at him, brow furrowed as she read his expression far too accurately. "Why are you looking at us like that?"

"No reason." He had to get them out of here. He stepped back and jumped for the side of the shaft. He caught the ridge around the edge and dragged himself up handhold by handhold until he reached the membrane that sealed the opening. He pushed at it, but it refused to budge. The texture was stiff and slick, as impermeable as glass.

Below him, Snap said in frustration, "It's no use. We stood on each other's shoulders to get to it, but without claws we can't get through."

Moon kept prodding at the edge, looking for a weak point, but he was afraid the boy was right.

Heart asked, "But where are the others? Did the hunters get away? Knell said he saw—"

Moon's fingers slipped and he dropped back to the floor. He absently wiped his hands. And if you got it open, what were you going to do then? The dakti were still up there, guarding them.

"The others are fine." He gave them a meaningful look and jerked his head up toward the opening. The Fell might be listening; with Moon here they would have to realize that Jade and the other Aeriats couldn't be far behind, but he didn't want to spell it out for them.

Heart subsided, and the others held back frustrated questions.

Watching him carefully, Needle said, "At the colony, there was a ruler who said Pearl had left us, that she wouldn't be coming back. He said they were waiting for Jade to join them, then we were going to leave the colony and go somewhere else." She made a despairing gesture. "Here, I guess."

Moon paced around the chamber, investigating the shadows. It was big enough for a few Dwei to sit or sleep in comfortably, and nearly featureless. "I think I saw that ruler. Right before Pearl tore his head off."

There were some gratified hisses, and Needle hugged herself. She said, "I knew the ruler was lying." She shot a fierce look at the others. "The queens are going to save us."

They were still watching him worriedly, and Gift said, "But why

did the Fell bring us here? And why us? If they just wanted to eat us. We're small, and not much of a meal."

Moon hoped to avoid that question. He stepped to the wall with the horizontal slits, and peered out. The chamber looked down on the hive's vast central well, daylight falling down from some opening high above. The curving walls were ringed with bulbous chambers like this one, and open ledges. Wedging himself into the gap, he had a good view of the floor several hundred paces below.

A big tunnel opened in the side of the hive down there, and towards the center of the floor was a round shaft, maybe the one that had led up from the groundling ruin, the one that had shone with daylight. Two kethel lay beside it, stretched out in sleep, armored sides lifting with their raspy breathing. It was probably the two who had flown here from Indigo Cloud. From the distance and turns the dakti had taken to bring him here, he thought the Dwei must be imprisoned on that bottom level, not far from where the tunnel emerged.

Merit tugged on his sleeve impatiently. He had fluffy light-colored hair and wide eyes, and made Moon think of what Chime must have looked like as an Arbora. He persisted, "You know why they brought us here, don't you?"

Maybe not knowing was worse. Moon turned back, and all their faces, staring up at him with hope and fear and dismay, made his heart hurt. He said reluctantly, "A ruler told Pearl and Jade that this flight wanted to... join with your court. We know they already had at least one crossbreed, a dakti with mentor powers. It was the reason that the court was trapped. It sees through the other dakti's eyes, and does something so you can't shift. There must be another one here; that's what's keeping us from shifting now."

"A dakti?" Heart blinked rapidly. "But..."

Dream said, "That's not even possible, is it?" She turned urgently to Heart. "We're too different from Fell. We couldn't... could we?"

Snap sank down to sit on the floor, as if his knees had gone weak. "I thought they were just going to eat us."

"Why do they want to do this?" Merit shivered. "So they can get mentor abilities? Mentors are born at random. Even when two mentors mate, it's not certain. We think it has something to do with queens and consorts mating with Arbora, but that's just an idea. Those clutches are just as likely to be warriors, or ordinary Arbora."

If Moon had to guess, which he didn't want to, he would have

said that the Fell meant to get mentors the same way Raksura did, by mating the Arbora until mentors were born. Only in Raksuran courts it was all done voluntarily. He didn't answer, hoping the Arbora would leave it at that.

But Heart looked up at Moon. "But you're a consort. They must want..."

"Uh, probably." He folded his arms uncomfortably, not certain how much to tell them. They seemed perfectly capable of drawing all the terrible conclusions on their own. "That's why the Fell stayed at the colony. They were hoping Jade and I would attack with Pearl and the others, that they could trap us."

"But they didn't trap you," Dream put in. "Until now, I mean. And Jade and Pearl are still free, right?"

"We had a weapon." Moon turned away again, knowing he was doing a bad job of reassuring them. He looked through the slit, down at the bottom of the well. The two kethel were still asleep, but some dakti flitted around down there now. "We can't use it here. The rulers know about it now." He wasn't sure what had happened to the waterskin of poison. If the Dwei had hoped to use it somehow to bargain with the Fell, they were out of luck.

The Arbora were quiet for a moment, trading uneasy glances. Then Heart asked, "What about the others trapped in the colony? Are they all right? Did you see them?"

The others chimed in with questions then and Moon ended up telling them a little about the attack on the colony. He tried to keep the explanation confined to things it wouldn't do the Fell any good to know, in case the dakti were listening or the rulers questioned them later.

Heart and the others hadn't known that Petal and so many of the soldiers were dead, believing all the missing members of the court to be imprisoned in another part of the colony. Watching them cling to each other and mourn, Moon felt terrible that he couldn't even tell them all the names of the dead.

"They kept us in those sacs," Snap said, leaning against Merit for comfort. "Sometimes they let us out and brought us food, but only a few at a time. We couldn't shift, and with the dakti and kethel there we couldn't run away."

Finally, when the Arbora had asked every question they could think of, and discussed the situation to the point where they were just repeating themselves, they settled down to try to rest, curling up

against each other. Moon sat nearby, leaning back against the wall with the slits so he could look out at the central well. He wasn't certain if they trusted him completely, but his presence seemed to give them a little hope, anyway.

The dakti didn't return. Moon watched the sunlight falling through the top of the hive change from morning to early afternoon. He knew Jade and the warriors had had time to make it here by now. They should have found his trail and the metal-mud, found the message he had left on the rock, and made it into the groundling city. And are probably sitting down there trying to think how to take on at least three kethel at once. You never did work that part out, either. The Aeriats who had survived imprisonment in the colony were probably too weak to fly at all yet, let alone to follow Jade all the way out here.

A hollow in the back of the chamber held stale water, but the dakti hadn't dropped in any food. Moon could go another couple of days before he got desperate, but the Arbora had already been through days of privation. They also hadn't been allowed to shift in all that time, and that had to be taking its toll. Moon was thinking of food, how he could make the dakti give them some, where Jade was and what was taking so long, when a kethel growl shattered the quiet.

The Arbora all twitched awake, eyes wide with fear. Moon sat up straight, craning his neck to peer through the slat. Below on the floor of the hive, one of the kethel had heaved itself to its feet, and the other stirred in irritation. In response, dakti dropped down through the well, spiraling in flight to cling to the wall above the lowest tunnel—the tunnel that led toward the side of the hive where the Dwei were imprisoned. And the kethel have flown a long way, and they're waking up hungry, Moon thought, watching grimly. At least the Dwei knew what was coming now; they had a chance to fight.

Snap and Heart crept to his side to peer out, the others gathering around.

"What are they doing?" Heart asked.

Moon couldn't think of any way to make it easier, and they were going to see for themselves in a moment. "They're going to eat some of the Dwei."

Merit made a noise of dismay, and Dream shuddered.

Dakti drove five Dwei out of the tunnel. The Dwei stumbled in the brighter light, their round heads turning as they looked around. They didn't fight, didn't try to escape. Moon hissed in disgusted disbelief. "I told them I found broken shells in the groundling city. They still think

the Fell aren't killing the ones they take?"

"They must have thought you were lying," Snap said helpfully.

The dakti drove the five hapless Dwei across the floor of the hive, closer to the shaft that led down into the ruin. If they meant to take them somewhere else, Moon would never know; one of the kethel grew impatient and pounced.

The first Dwei went down under its claws with barely a sound. The others scattered away, keening in terror. The second kethel leapt in to slap at them, sending them rolling helplessly across the floor. The crunching and tearing as the kethel's jaws worked almost drowned out the Dwei's cries of pain.

The Arbora retreated hastily from the openings, some covering their ears.

"Is that what they're going to do to us?" Needle asked in terror.

"No." Heart pulled her into a tight hug. "If they were just going to eat us, they would have done it by now."

Merit looked away, swallowing uneasily. "What they're going to do to us is worse."

Any reassurance Moon could give them would be a lie or wishful thinking, so he didn't say anything. Jade should be here by now. He was trusting her and whoever was with her to think of something.

One Dwei made a half-hearted attempt to take flight only to be swarmed by the dakti. They forced it down into the kethel's reach again, and it batted the Dwei back and forth a little, then finally snatched it up in its jaws. The Dwei hardly struggled.

This doesn't make sense, Moon thought. On the occasions when something large had tried to eat him, he had fought harder and more frantically than that.

This behavior was at odds with everything he had seen of the Dwei. They were much stronger and meaner than this. If all five had attacked one of the kethel at once, they could have done some damage. Unless... They had the waterskin of poison. They knew what it was. And he had told them about the suicidal groundling method of using it.

Moon stirred impatiently. It could just be too-hopeful speculation on his part, and even if it was true, one waterskin split five ways wasn't much. And there was still one more kethel to worry about, the one guarding the Dwei prison. There was nothing to do except to wait and watch and hope.

Chapter Nineteen

The Arbora drew back to huddle together again, trying to rest. Moon stayed at the wall, grimly watching the kethel finish their meal. The dakti crept in to feast on the scraps, then pushed the shells over the edge of the shaft to fall down into the ruin.

Then Moon heard movement up above, near the sealed doorway in the ceiling. He got to his feet just as the membrane peeled away and a ruler dropped into the chamber. The Arbora scrambled up with a chorus of startled snarls and hisses, and clustered behind Moon.

It wasn't the ruler who had caught Moon with the Dwei. This one was older, more heavily built, his dark armor plates scarred and chipped from many battles. He fixed a mocking gaze on Moon and said, "I am Janeas. I've seen you, through the eyes of my brother Kathras."

"Did you see me rip his throat out?" Moon asked. He didn't feel like he had much to lose at the moment.

Janeas surged forward. He grabbed Moon's arm, yanked him forward, nearly dislocating his shoulder. Moon jabbed at his eyes, the only vulnerable point he could reach. The blow he got in return rocked his head back with stunning force. The backhand follow-up made his knees buckle.

Janeas wrapped an arm around Moon's throat, dragging him toward the doorway. The Arbora flung themselves on Janeas in a hissing mob, but the ruler partially extended his wings, buffeting them back. Clawing at the scaled arm and trying to writhe free, Moon caught a glimpse of Heart, scrabbling past the wings and nearly climbing Janeas's back up onto his head. If she had been in her Arbora form, she could have done some real damage, but Janeas just shook her off with an annoyed snarl. He stepped under the doorway, then tossed Moon up through it.

Moon landed hard on the surface of the passage and rolled upright only to get slammed down again when several dakti jumped on him.

The other dakti stood around, clicking and hissing at each other in the Fell language, sounding agitated. Janeas leapt back up out of the chamber and growled an order, and they hurried to fix the membrane back over the doorway. Pinned face down on the passage floor, Moon heard the Arbora yelling furiously. At least they didn't sound hurt.

Janeas gestured and the dakti leapt off Moon. Released, Moon scabbled back a desperate few paces before Janeas hauled him upright.

Janeas dragged him down the passage. Moon resisted hard enough to get bounced off the wall a few times. Wherever they were going, he was certain he didn't want to get there.

The passage turned and dead-ended in an opening into a bigger chamber, the ceiling curving up high overhead. Moon barely glimpsed it before Janeas shoved him face-first into the wall and pinned him there. He twisted his head to the side to get air.

Janeas was breathing harshly, though Moon didn't think his struggles had been enough to wind a Fell. Then Janeas pressed against him, the scales of his chest so cold Moon could feel the chill through his sweat-soaked shirt. The dakti retreated back down the passage, and Moon had a heartbeat to wonder if the ruler had brought him up here to rape him. Then Janeas whispered in his ear, "She's been waiting for you, little consort. Don't disappoint her."

"Who—" Moon managed to say, just before Janeas jerked him away from the wall and tossed him through the opening into the chamber below.

He closed his throat against a yell and landed an instant later in stale water. He hit the bottom of a pool that was barely waist-deep and flailed to his feet, coughing and choking.

Shaking water out of his hair, Moon looked around, relieved to see nothing was about to leap on him. The pool lay at one end of a high-ceilinged chamber that curved to follow the side of the hive. Light fell through large windows in the outer wall that faced out into the central well. There were platforms near the windows, oval and a little more than waist-high, built of the same material as the rest of the hive, that could be anything from Dwei beds to storage containers. There was also an open shaft in the center of the floor. Instinctively, Moon tasted the air, but all he could scent from here was Fell, and that wasn't helpful. The passage behind him was set nearly thirty paces up the smooth wall, not an easy climb for him in groundling form. And he had the strong sense that Janeas still waited up there.

Not that down here is much safer.

He climbed out of the pool, dripping on the grainy floor. The dunking had washed away most of the dried remnants of the metal-mud. He moved cautiously forward, his skin prickling uneasily, trying to see further into the shadows. He knew he wasn't alone in here.

He went to the shaft first, craning his neck to peer down. It plunged straight through the hive. Dim daylight was visible down at the bottom. That would have been a help, if he had claws to climb or wings to fly.

He looked around again. By this time his eyes had adjusted and he realized the shadow in the inner wall was a large, Dwei-sized opening into another chamber or passage.

He started toward it, noticing that Dwei shells hung on the walls, polished to gleaming green-blue iridescence and etched with markings in a strange language. They appeared to commemorate something, ancestor worship or funerary tributes. Some had been knocked to the floor and broken, the pieces scattered. Other things were strewn around, things that looked like they had been looted from a groundling city. Moon picked his way around torn and stained fragments of rich cloth and fur, a broken ivory cup, all of it dropped like trash. These Fell lived like the others Moon had seen, making nothing of their own, stealing even their clothes from groundlings.

Moon reached the opening and pushed aside the drifting fragments of a torn membrane curtain.

Beyond it was another chamber. In the shadows against the far wall, something large and alive lay in a nest of torn cloth, fragments of Dwei shell scattered around it. He could see a sloping, scaled flank, the folded edge of a leathery wing, a gleam of fangs. It was breathing, but so slowly it was nearly silent. Moon's throat was already too dry to swallow, his body already cold from fear, and he had been half-expecting this. It was a Fell progenitor, the only female Fell, the ones who mated with the rulers to produce all the rest. He had never seen one before, only heard of their existence, but this had to be one.

He stepped back, away from the curtain, feeling the cold settle into his bones. Jade is not going to be here in time. If she was even on her way, if the court hadn't just cut its losses and given up on him and the stolen Arbora. He couldn't let the Fell have what they wanted.

Moon backed away another few steps, trying to think. Find a weapon and kill the progenitor. Or make the progenitor kill you. He had to admit the second option was more likely.

He looked around at the debris on the floor, hoping for something with a sharp edge. He saw a tumbled pile of dark cloth behind the nearest platform. A few steps took him close enough to see clearly. He stopped, startled.

It was a dead ruler. He was in his groundling form, pale hair fanned out behind his head, open eyes staring sightlessly up. A trail of blood leaked from his mouth, staining the waxy white skin of his cheek. His dark clothes were disarrayed, pulled open across his chest, a chain of rubies broken and scattered near his hand, but there was no visible wound. Moon took a wary step forward, taking in a breath to taste the air again. It wasn't a trick. The ruler was really dead, and had been here long enough for his blood to cool.

Behind him, a voice said, "I killed him when he arrived with the kethel."

Moon twitched around, his breath caught in his throat.

She was standing in front of the shaft, as if she had just climbed up out of it. She could have passed for a groundling, or the groundling form of an Aeriati. She was tall and slim, with gold-tinted skin and blue eyes, her hair straight and dark, falling past her waist. She was dressed like a Raksura too, in a watered gold silk wrap, leaving her arms bare. Then a dakti crept around her, peering up at Moon with wide-eyed curiosity. A dakti without wings, with the heavy build of an Arbora. A mentor-dakti, Moon thought. He had known there had to be at least one more here. And there were no female rulers. She's another crossbreed, a warrior-ruler.

Her gaze on the dead ruler, she said, "He failed me, and I was angry. To bring me only six Arbora, no queen, no consort. By the time I discovered that you had followed him, it was too late." Her voice sounded like a groundling woman's, light and warm.

She took a step toward Moon, and that was when he caught her scent. He flinched backward, nearly overpowered by the flight-urge to turn and throw himself out the window into the hive well. He conquered it with a shiver, still feeling it trickle through his veins like icy water. Her scent was foul, strange, wrong. Even the mentor-dakti just smelled like a Fell.

She said, "I won't hurt you." She tilted her head, her lips forming a smile. There was something disjointed about her face, something awry about how she wore the expression. "You saw the Arbora are well."

The Arbora. It was a reminder that Moon didn't just have himself to worry about. He felt certain he already knew, but he made himself

say, "You've still got plenty of Dwei to eat. What do you want with us?"

"We need company. There's nothing like us anywhere in the Three Worlds." She touched the mentor-dakti's head. It leaned against her leg, nuzzling her. "Especially since you killed Erasmus, back at your colony. But perhaps it was appropriate that he died there, after he spent so many turns watching it for us. I wanted him to stay here in safety, but he was desperate to see it with his own eyes, instead of only in his scrying. Demus here is not so accomplished, yet." She gently pushed the mentor-dakti away. Demus hissed in mild rebuke, then turned and crept away. It was smaller than the other one, and its right leg was twisted at an odd angle. She watched it retreat, then looked back at Moon. "You didn't ask my name. It's Ranea. I know yours." She lifted her hand, and her nails were almost as long as claws. "Come here, Moon."

He fell back another step. "Let the Arbora go, and I'll do what you want." He didn't think she would go for it, but it was worth a try.

"Why should I? I need them." The smile was still on her face, but it was almost as if she had forgotten it was there. He realized then what was wrong with her expression: it was like an imitation of things she had seen others do, without any real understanding of what it meant. In the same warm tone, Ranea said, "And you don't have anything I want that I can't just take."

Moon backed away from her. He told himself it didn't matter what she did to him. If she was part Raksuran warrior, then she was infertile; it was the progenitor in the other room he had to worry about. "Your ruler told the court you wanted to join with us."

"That's true." She paced forward. There was something predatory in the ease and focus of her movement, making her look even less like a groundling. "Our flight once ruled the east, all of the great peninsula. So the rulers said."

Moon backed into the platform and flinched when its brittle edge bumped him in the lower back. She stopped a few paces away, watching him, and her foul scent made the back of his throat itch.

"They told me how the groundling empires died on our whim, and prey was plentiful. But they say we fought among ourselves, broke into smaller flights, became too isolated, too inbred. Progenitors died too soon. Fewer rulers were born, but more sterile dakti and kethel. So my progenitor and her rulers made an experiment, capturing a Raksuran consort and forcibly mating with him."

Ranea paused to taste the air. Moon knew his scent must have

changed. He had felt the sweat break out on his skin. She took her time, obviously relishing his fear, then continued easily, "He died soon after. She tried again, mating her first crossbreed progeny to her rulers, to captured Arbora. Eventually, this produced Erasus, then later, Demus, and I." Her voice sharpened. "Janeas, come here, I know you're watching."

After a moment of silence, Janeas jumped out of the upper passage, glided over the pool, and landed near the shaft. Demus chirped at him, a greeting that Janeas ignored. Ranea stared at him, still with that fixed smile.

After a long moment, Janeas said, stiffly, "I have done everything you asked." He didn't look at the dead ruler sprawled near the platform.

The words lingered in the damp air. Then Ranea turned back to Moon, as if Janeas hadn't spoken.

"When you came to Liheas in the groundling city," she said, "he wanted to bring you to me. He thought you were perfect. A consort who knew nothing of the Raksura, who could be molded as we wished, who could be taught to do our bidding. But it was all a trick, and you killed him."

She probably expected him to argue with her, something that would be about as pointless as arguing with the dead ruler. Moon just said, "I was lucky."

"Do you want to know why we chose Indigo Cloud?" She moved closer, within arm's reach. "We came for you."

Don't fall for this trick again, he told himself. He said, "That's a lie. I traveled across the east, if you knew where I was you could have caught me anytime."

"I wasn't ready to clutch yet," Ranea said it as if it was self-evident. "Erasus' augury said you would eventually be at Indigo Cloud, that then the time would be right."

Clutch? Moon flicked a look at the doorway to the other chamber. "I don't understand."

She followed his gaze. "That was—is—my progenitor. My mother. She's old now, and dying." She took in his expression, and this time her smile was real, a ruler's smile, a Fell's smile, cold and predatory and satisfied. "Did you think I was only a Fell-born warrior? I'm a progenitor. A Fell-born queen."

Moon couldn't answer, his throat locked with sick horror. You should have jumped out the window when you had the chance.

She stepped closer, a hand under his chin lifting his head. "All I have to do is breed more queens like myself, more dakti like Demus, and nothing can stop us. We can take control of every other Fell flight we touch, have all the prey we want. We can rule the Three Worlds, earth, air, and water." Her hand moved down, resting against his throat, almost absently, part caress and part menace, like a butcher petting a herdbeast to calm it. She said, "It's known that the Fell and the Aeriati came from the same source. The only difference is that the Aeriati joined with another race of shifters called Arbora." She cocked her head. "You didn't know they were two different races? Arbora build, they shape, they craft. They make images, art. All the Aeriati do is fight and eat. Two related races that combined to make something better. Why shouldn't this happen again?"

Panic abruptly overcame numb shock, and Moon knew he had to make her kill him. He couldn't let her take him, birth another clutch of half-Raksuran monsters to attack other courts, to destroy even more groundling cities, to move across the Three Worlds like a plague. They wouldn't stop. They didn't know how. All they knew was breeding and eating, and they would do it until they killed every living creature in their reach. "Because you're Fell. You're abominations, and you destroy everything you touch." A shadow flickered in her eyes, and he knew the strike was true. "In Saraseil, Liheas touched me, and it ruined everything. It just took turns and turns for me to know it."

She hit him, an open-handed slap that knocked him off his feet. Half-stunned, he tried to roll away from her, but she grabbed him by the hair. Moon clawed at her arm, kicked, trying to wrench away even if he lost most of his scalp, but she pulled him up onto his knees.

A dakti careened in, bounced off the ceiling, and landed near Janeas. It spat out words in the Fell language, hissing and clicking madly.

Ranea dropped Moon and turned to the dakti. Moon scrambled away, watching her warily. He saw Janeas move away as she stepped past him, as if the ruler wasn't eager to get within arm's reach of her either. Ranea grabbed the messenger dakti by the head, lifting it off the ground and shaking it, giving it a sharp order. It repeated the words, gasping this time, probably from the pressure of her hand on its skull. She dropped the dakti and strode to the nearest window.

Moon staggered to his feet and followed her at a careful distance. He wasn't sure what he was going to see, but he was hoping for an unexpectedly large number of Raksura. He caught the edge of the window and looked down.

The two kethel who had been lying on the hive floor were gone.

No, not gone. He squinted, peering down. They were in groundling form, two big muscular bodies, sprawled unconscious near the shaft down into the ruin. Other smaller bodies were scattered around them. Dakti, the dakti that ate the kethel's scraps, Moon thought in relief. The Dwei had really done it! They had given the poison to five of their number, then sent them to be eaten by the kethel.

He looked up to see Ranea staring at him, her eyes brilliant with rage. She said, "You did this."

"No. I was here." In hindsight, he probably shouldn't have smiled when he said it.

He saw her hand lift and tried to duck away, but the blow caught his shoulder, knocking him sprawling. Tasting blood from a bitten lip, he rolled over to see her standing over him. You got your wish. She's going to kill you.

Behind him, Janeas said, "He must have brought some of that groundling filth here."

Ranea turned the furious glare on Janeas. "When you found him you should have searched him, searched the Dwei."

"I didn't find him; that was Venras," Janeas said, sounding bitterly pleased. "Demus saw through his eyes. Demus should have told him to search. You've put him above us all. Such things should be his decision."

She stood there a moment, fists clenched, shivering with rage, as if unable to decide who she wanted to kill more, Moon or Janeas. Then leaned down to grab Moon's arm and dragged him upright. She tossed him at Janeas.

"Watch him."

She stepped away from them and shifted. Dark mist swirled around her for a heartbeat, forming into a shape that was something out of a nightmare. Her scales were the matte black of Fell, without the colors or undersheen of Raksura, and the texture was coarse. Her wings had the leathery hide of the dakti, and her head was crowned with both an armored crest and Raksuran spines. And she was big, half again as tall as Moon's shifted form.

She stepped forward and leapt out through the window, her wings snapping out as she dropped from view. The messenger dakti struggled up and jumped after her. Janeas stared after them, gripping Moon's arm until the bones ground together.

Think of something, Moon told himself. Ranea had killed a ruler for no reason, for trying to salvage their sick plan and bring her at

least some of the Arbora she wanted. Janeas had to see that his own chances of survival rested on her whim. Moon said, “You can’t think this is a good idea.”

Janeas said nothing, but he didn’t hit Moon, either.

Moon persisted, “All the Fell at Indigo Cloud are dead. You don’t have enough here to fight us off, and the Aeriats know not to get near that thing now.”

The mentor-dakti chittered warningly, and Janeas snarled at it.

Moon considered that response, the fact that he had given a ruler a chance to gloat over him and the ruler hadn’t taken it. He had always thought rulers only cared about themselves, that the survival of the Fell as a race wouldn’t bother them as much as a threat to their own scales. Except apparently that wasn’t the case at all. There weren’t that many rulers in Fell flights, and what was that like, to live surrounded by dakti and kethel who differed from trained animals only by their active malice? Maybe rulers... cared about each other. Kathras cared about Liheas, or at least cared that I killed him.

Moon wet dry lips and said, “Kathras was dying when he found us.”

Janeas made a sound, an exhalation of breath that wasn’t a hiss. Moon said, “He could barely stay in the air. She made him fly himself to death to catch up with us, through mountain currents, ice storms. There were two of us. We could stop. One could rest while the other hunted.”

Janeas flung him down, and Moon struck the rubbery floor face-first. Standing over him, Janeas snarled, “You killed him. I saw it.”

Moon pushed himself up enough to look at him. His nose was bloody and it was hard to breathe.

“It was easy, because he was already dying.” He pointed back to the dead ruler that lay rotting in the cool air. “Just like she killed him —” Janeas took a step forward and Moon shoved himself back. “—for no reason. Because he tried to obey her orders. He tried to salvage her stupid plan.”

Janeas lunged forward. Moon rolled, pushed to his feet, and backed away.

“You think there’s any place for you, for the other rulers, once she does this? She needs dakti and kethel for slaves, not—”

Something flashed past the window, and Moon flinched back, thinking it was Ranea returning. But whatever it was had fallen

straight down past this level. Then he heard a crash from somewhere below.

Janeas froze, head cocked toward the sound. An instant later, something else fell past the window, and this time Moon saw it: a big clay jar, one of the storage jars he had seen in the ruin.

Janeas strode to the window and Moon stumbled after him.

The jars had struck the floor of the hive and somehow burst into flame. Black smoke streamed up as fire spread across the floor.

Dry metal-mud, packed into the jars, and set on fire, Moon realized, and the surge of hope was almost painful. That has to be Chime's idea. They would be dropping it on the outside of the hive, too, with any luck.

Another ruler flew toward them from the far side of the hive, banking in to perch in the window. It was Venras, the young ruler who had found Moon with the Dwei. He spoke to Janeas in the Fell language, and though Moon couldn't understand the words, the panic was obvious.

Moon stepped back from the window, looking at Janeas. "They're going to burn you out, kill anything that tries to escape—"

Janeas whipped around and grabbed him by the throat. His claws pricking Moon's skin, he said, "We have their Arbora, and you. They won't burn this place while you're here."

Moon couldn't help grabbing Janeas' wrist, but he forced himself to stand still, not to try to curl his body up to use the disemboweling claws he didn't have.

"There are plenty of Arbora left alive in the colony. They don't need these." It didn't matter if it was true or not, he just had to make Janeas believe it. "And they don't want me—"

Janeas stepped close, hissing into his face. "You're their only consort—"

Moon didn't have to fake the bitter amusement. "The reigning queen ordered me to leave days ago. They know what Kathras said. They know you came to Indigo Cloud because of me. They only let me stay this long to help fight you."

Janeas stared into his eyes, and must have read the truth there. He snarled, his hand closing around Moon's throat, cutting off his air. Moon frantically pried at his hand, tried to kick, then his vision went dark.

The terrible pressure stopped. He hit the floor, gasping in a breath

with the jolt of impact. His throat and lungs ached, and for a moment he couldn't do anything but huddle on the floor and breathe. He managed to look up and saw Janeas coming out of the inner chamber, half-carrying the older Fell progenitor.

She was a little bigger than the ruler, but her scales looked soft, and her armored crest was much smaller, as if she hadn't been meant to fight. She leaned heavily on Janeas' shoulder, her half-furled wings drooping.

Janeas led her to the window where Venras still waited. Venras spoke again, jerking his chin at Moon. Janeas just shook his head, stepping up to the window, pulling the progenitor after him.

They're leaving, Moon thought in dizzy relief. And Janeas didn't want to kill Moon because he knew if he did, Ranea would follow him in a fury. That part's not so good. If the queen-progenitor returned in time, she could take Moon and still salvage her plan for a crossbreed flight. Janeas was leaving Moon behind as the distraction he needed to escape.

Venras twitched around to take the old progenitor's other arm, and the three of them dropped out of the window.

Moon staggered to his feet. Demus had crept forward to watch Janeas leave. It saw Moon looking at it and growled, flexing its claws. That thing has to go now.

It was smaller than a real dakti, and much scrawnier than a real Arbora, though its teeth and claws looked sharp. Moon looked around for a weapon, and spotted an unlikely one.

Watching Demus, he went to the platform where the dead ruler lay. He rolled the body over, dumping it out of the brocade coat it wore. Shaking out the heavy cloth, he paced toward Demus.

It crept backward, its spines bristling. It rasped in Raksuran, "She'll claw the skin from your body if you touch me."

"She's going to do that anyway." Moon didn't hesitate, still stalking the creature, angling to one side, forcing it to move back toward the pool of water.

"Don't kill me." The tone changed from threat to plea and Demus crouched, trying to look helpless. "Please."

"Then take the shifting geas off me and the Arbora," Moon said, still moving forward, "and run away." It seemed a rational choice to him, but then this thing was a Fell.

Demus crouched low, whining, then suddenly leapt for Moon's

head. Moon lunged toward it, swinging the heavy coat up. It hit the fabric and then him, bowling him over backward. Moon wrapped his arms and legs around it and rolled, trapping it in the heavy brocade, pinning it with his weight. Demus clawed with frantic strength, its jaws clamping onto his shoulder through the fabric, but its claws caught in the heavy material, just long enough for Moon to roll them both toward the pool.

They fell into the cold water and Moon caught a breath before he went under, using his weight to shove the creature to the bottom. Desperate, Demus wrenched an arm free and clawed at his side, tearing through his shirt and the skin beneath. Moon pinned its hand with his knee and held on grimly, staying under until his lungs were about to burst. Hoping the damn thing would be too distracted to hold the geas on him, he tried to shift.

It felt like it had when he had resisted Pearl. The pressure in his chest and behind his eyes was increased a hundredfold by the pressure to breathe, the growing pain in his lungs. Then suddenly something gave way, and wings and spines formed on his back; scales spread over his skin.

Moon lifted up, getting a much-needed breath. Demus was limp in his hands. Moon pulled the coat aside and snapped Demus' neck just to make certain.

The relief of being able to shift was overwhelming; the claw scratches, bruises, everything faded into minor irritations. He shook the water off and jumped for the passage above the pool, reaching it in one long bound.

As he raced along the open passage, flames spread across the bottom floor of the hive, and thick smoke streamed upward, obscuring much of the center well. He heard the buzzing flight of Dwei below him somewhere, and the muffled roar of a kethel. The Dwei must have overwhelmed the single remaining kethel and escaped their prison.

Several dakti still guarded the doorway to the Arbora's chamber. When Moon landed among them and ripped the first two open, the others scattered, diving off the ledge into the smoky well. Moon crouched to rip open the door membrane, calling down, "Heart? Can you all shift?"

"Yes!" He saw Heart looking up at him, bright blue in her Arbora form. "Moon, did the others start the fire?"

"Yes! Come on out; we're leaving," he told her, looking warily out at the central well. Clouds of smoke obscured the view, giving him only glimpses of dakti flying wildly around.

Merit scrambled out of the shaft, followed rapidly by Needle and Gift. Crouching next to Moon, his spines bristling nervously, Merit demanded, "How do we get out?"

Good question. Moon couldn't risk trying to fly the Arbora out one at a time, and the openings in the wall made a climb up or down impossible. He would have to lead them out the way he had come in, whether it was on fire or not. Then he made out a large dark shape, banking through the smoke, heading back toward the progenitor's chamber. Uh oh. Ranea was returning and Moon was out of time. "Run, that way!" The startled Arbora stood and Moon gave Merit a push to get him started. "Now! Take the first turn down!"

Dream was just climbing out of the shaft with Snap and Heart behind her. Moon dragged them out and tossed them after the others. He ran after them, keeping his eyes on that dark shape.

Merit reached the open passage in the wall first, the turn into the long spiral ramp that led down through the hive, and looked back to Moon for instructions. Moon waved at him to keep going.

Then he felt a rush of air behind him. Moon somersaulted forward and landed in a crouch. Ranea was barely ten paces away, cupping her wings, coming in to land on the ledge. He shot forward, turning to rake her across the chest with his disemboweling claws. She tumbled backward off the ledge. Moon bounced off the ceiling and dove for the passage down.

It was the long spiral he remembered, leading down toward the bottom of the hive, and he could hear the Arbora about three turns ahead of him. Leaping from wall to wall, Moon felt that familiar constriction in his chest, that pressure, and thought, It's her, she's trying to make me shift. Ranea was part queen, and she had the Raksuran queen's power, just not as strongly as the two mentor-dakti. If she succeeded, he was done for. But he needed her to stay focused on him, and not the Arbora.

He caught up with them at the fifth turn and dropped to the floor to run beside them.

"What is that thing?" Heart asked breathlessly. "What kind of Fell is—"

"It's another crossbreed, part progenitor, part queen."

Heart threw him a horrified look. Running just ahead of her, Merit gasped, "I didn't think this could get worse."

Oh, it can get much worse, Moon thought. "Just run."

Around the next turn, a passage in the outer wall glowed with

warm daylight. Needle and Dream reached it first and ducked into it; the other Arbora followed.

Moon thought, Damn it, that's not going to work. They were still too high. There wouldn't be a way down for the Arbora. Moon darted after them.

The passage opened out onto a broad ledge in the side of the hive that looked out over the pillars and crumbled walls of the main entrance to the ruined city. The curve of the river lay just beyond it, the canyon heavy now with the shadows of late afternoon. "Wrong way, go back!"

"No, no, look!" Needle grabbed his arm, bouncing with excitement. "It's Jade!"

"What?" Moon turned. Jade and several Aeriats were just flying over the top of the hive. Their colors were oddly mottled and it took Moon a moment to realize they were covered with metal-mud.

Dream and Snap called out in chorus, a sustained high-pitched note. Jade twisted in mid-air, turning to lead the way in a swooping dive directly toward them. The other Aeriats peeled off to circle, and she landed with a thump on the ledge. Her scales were blotchy with metal-mud. She looked exhausted, furious, and beautiful. "Moon—"

Moon hoped she didn't want a detailed explanation, because there wasn't time for one. "Quick, she's coming! Get the Arbora out of here."

Jade turned to the warriors. "Do it! Take them to our hiding place!"

Floret and Coil swept forward, snatching up Needle and Gift on the wing. Vine, Song, Sand, and Chime landed to get the others. Chime grabbed Heart and asked Moon, "Aren't you coming?" He sounded breathless with fear and excitement.

"Not yet." Moon shook his head. "Go, get her out of here."

"I'll explain on the way," Heart told Chime, wrapping her arms around his neck.

As Chime dove off the ledge, Jade said, "Who's coming?"

He said, "It's a progenitor, a crossbreed like the mentor-dakti. She's part queen. We have to kill her."

Jade hissed, spines flaring. "Did she—"

Moon heard the rush of air from behind him and dropped into a crouch. Ranea slammed through the passage, saw Jade, and leapt

straight for her. Jade fell backwards, curling her body up, just as Ranea crashed into her. They tumbled across the ledge in furious struggle. Moon jumped for Ranea's back, got buffeted back by a wing and thrown against the ledge. He rolled upright just as Jade and Ranea broke apart.

Terrified, he looked at Jade, but she was crouched, hissing through barred fangs, battered but not bleeding. Ranea had rips across both shoulders, her dark scales dotted lightly with blood. She grinned at Jade, her jaw distended to show a startling array of teeth. "Come now, we're kin. We should be friends."

Jade grinned back. "I'm going to rip your womb out and eat it." Then she launched herself at Ranea's throat.

They tumbled off the ledge in a furious, snarling tangle of wings and tails. Moon dove after them, darting in to rake Ranea's wings. Ranea obviously couldn't force Jade to shift, but Pearl had said Raksuran queens couldn't do that to each other. Moon had been able to resist her so far, but he was willing to bet the warriors couldn't.

Locked in battle, Jade and Ranea fell far enough to be in danger of crashing into the walls of the ruin. Moon yelled, "Jade, break off!"

Jade tore herself free and Ranea wheeled away, knocking off the top of a pillar before catching the air and banking up. Moon stayed near Jade, circling around while she caught the air again and swooped back up. Ranea was higher in the air, but that wasn't much of an advantage; she could only close with one of them at a time, and the other could attack her from behind.

"Try to get her up to the top of the hive," Jade said, as she spiraled up toward him. "The others are—"

Moon lost the rest as Ranea rushed down at them again, heading for Jade.

Moon slipped sideways toward Ranea, taking a swipe at her face. She turned on him with a shriek, and he kicked at her stomach, trying to hook his claws under her scales. She clawed at his legs, nearly getting a grip on him, then jerked back when Jade struck at her from below. Moon twisted away, taking a painful rake across his wing. That ought to do it, he thought, knowing that if she hadn't been angry enough to follow him before, she was now. He broke off, heading up toward the hive, and Ranea shot after him.

The gold-brown surface of the hive raced beneath him as he streaked upward. He could feel Ranea behind him, too close, and risked a look back. She was nearly on him, but Jade was nearly on

her, raking at her from behind.

Moon shot up over the curve of the hive. The surface was hundreds of paces wide, sloping dramatically toward the big opening in the center that led down into the well. Right, where are the others?

Then he caught sight of a familiar flash of gold and indigo. Pearl and four warriors circled away from the top of the hive, the last one dropping another pottery jar through the opening to add to the fire and confusion below.

Pearl must have spotted Moon and seen what was chasing him. She swept into a tight turn, arrowing down toward him.

Moon shouted to Pearl, "She's part queen. She can make the warriors shift!"

Pearl called out to the Aeriats, a high-pitched cry. Immediately they banked and turned away from the hive.

Ranea saw Pearl and screamed in fury, realizing she had been deliberately trapped. Pearl stooped on her, hard and fast, as Jade came at Ranea from below. Instead of heading toward either one, Ranea dipped to the side and slammed her whole bodyweight into Moon.

The impact stunned him. He fell onto the surface of the hive, then tumbled down the slope and over the edge of the opening.

For a heartbeat he was too dazed to react, then realized he was falling through smoky air right into another fight, between buzzing Dwei and a roaring kethel. He snapped his wings in and plunged past them, just missing one of the Dwei. Once safely below them, he extended his wings and caught the air to circle away. Looking up, still a little dazed, he thought, I'm not getting out that way.

Above him in the smoke-filled well, the Dwei attacked the kethel, darting in at it as it twisted in the air. Their wings moved so fast they were white blurs. Their buzzing was ear-piercing. Trapped in the hive's well by the Dwei, the kethel couldn't maneuver, couldn't escape. It slammed into the hive wall, sending a whole section of ledge crashing down onto the burning floor below. Its tail knocked a Dwei out of the air, but there were too many.

Moon banked down toward the side of the hive, headed for the passage he and the Arbora had used to get out. But it wasn't there. The whole section had collapsed, and he couldn't spot the passage anymore. I'd just like something to be easy for once, he thought in exasperation, looking for a place to land.

The window into Ranea's chamber was still intact. He twisted to

avoid another angry Dwei, and landed on the window's edge. The chamber was still occupied only by the dead, a haze of smoke hanging in the air. He bounded across to the shaft and looked down. He could still see daylight coming in from somewhere below. He slung himself over the side, holding on with one set of claws, ready to drop. Then he stopped.

He scented Raksura. He tasted the air, making certain. He thought sourly, Oh good, more crossbreeds.

Moon climbed down the wall, digging his claws into the rubbery material, following the scent. Openings in the shaft, some large Dwei-sized doorways and some just thin slats, let in light and air, but all were empty.

He was a good hundred paces down when he heard scrabbling, a desperate panting, as if something was trapped and trying to claw its way out. It was coming from one of the chambers with a slatted opening, and he swung down to look inside.

The occupants sprang back, hissing at him.

He was so sure of seeing a mentor-dakti, or a dozen mentor-dakti, that for an instant he didn't realize what he was looking at. There were three of them, with scales, wings, and tails, like Raksuran fledglings, the biggest not more than waist-high. Two were black like Fell, but one was bright green, with a faint yellow, web-like tracery over the scales... Idiot, he thought. They were Raksuran fledglings. It was a baby queen and two consorts. The royal clutch from Sky Copper. Stone said he saw they had a queen, and Flower thought there were two consorts. "Are you from Sky Copper?"

"Maybe!" The little queen bristled her spines, glaring. The chamber was small, the doorway in the wall sealed with a heavy membrane. The queen and the larger consort had been trying to claw their way through it. "Who are you?"

"I'm Moon, from Indigo Cloud." He dug his claws into two of the slats and threw his weight back. The slats ripped loose and he tumbled a good distance down the shaft before he caught himself and climbed back up. A repeat performance made a hole large enough for him to perch in. The three fledglings huddled together, watching him warily, and he asked, "Were there any others?"

"The others went away," the queen said, still sounding furious. "There's just us now."

The consorts were miniature versions of himself, their spines bristling with terror. The little one's wings looked far too small to

support him. Moon asked, "Can you all fly?"

The queen snarled, "We're not leaving Bitter!"

"I'm not leaving anybody." He just wanted to make sure which one not to drop. "Come on, we need to go."

Bitter, presumably the smaller consort, edged forward, tasting the air. Whatever he scented must have reassured him, because he suddenly jumped for Moon's chest. Moon caught him and tucked him under his wing, telling him, "Hold on." Bitter hooked his claws firmly into Moon's scales.

The queen and the older consort looked at each other, apparently came to a decision, and leapt for Moon. He gathered them against his chest and they clung to him, digging their claws in. It wasn't comfortable, but he could stand it.

He swung back out of the chamber and started to climb down, going as fast as he dared.

"Bad Arbora-thing wouldn't let us shift," the queen said resentfully, clinging to his collar flange.

"I know. It's dead now," Moon told her. "What are your names?"

She adjusted her hold on him, thought about it, and decided to admit, "I'm Frost. That's Thorn, and Bitter."

His face buried against Moon's chest, Thorn said, "Is she dead?" Bitter, tucked up near Moon's armpit, shivered. There was no mistaking who he meant.

"I don't know," Moon said, figuring in their situation honesty was better no matter how grim. "I hope so."

Thorn took that in silently. Bitter whispered something inaudible. Apparently translating, Thorn said, "Where's your queen?"

Frost sniffed at Moon's neck and reported, "He doesn't have a queen."

"Why? What's wrong with him?" Thorn wanted to know.

"That's still being debated," Moon said. He was climbing down out of the smoky haze and toward the scents of dust and rock, and the acrid musk of Dwei. As he looked down now, he could see the shaft ended in a chamber, lit by late afternoon daylight and strewn with drifts of sand. "Now be quiet."

Unexpectedly, they all obeyed. Moon reached the end of the shaft and hung head down to take a cautious look at the chamber. It was empty, with one passage leading into the dark interior of the hive and

another leading out to daylight. Moon could just glimpse a half-demolished wall from the ruin. He just hoped there wasn't anything out there waiting for them.

Moon dropped to the floor and started for the daylight passage. He had an instant's warning, a sense of air movement behind him. He should have turned, twisted to the side, but that would have exposed his chest and he had the three fledglings to protect. He flared his spines and bolted forward instead. That was the wrong choice.

Ranea hit him from behind, with a force that flung him forward, nearly to the passage entrance. Moon caught himself on his hands and knees, the fledglings tumbling to the floor. He shouted, "Run!"

Frost grabbed Thorn and Thorn grabbed Bitter, and they shot down the passage toward daylight. Moon twisted around, but Ranea landed on him before he could get to his feet. He let her bowl him backward, tucking his head down and clawing blindly for her face, her eyes, yanking up both feet to rip at her abdomen. She ripped back at him, snarling, and they rolled across the sandy floor. He felt his heel-claw sink past her scales into softer flesh; she screamed and flung him off. He scrambled down the passage, out through the opening, and into bright sunlight and an open court surrounded by broken pillars. He couldn't see the fledglings but knew they couldn't be far away. He extended his wings and crouched for a leap, meaning to lead Ranea away.

He felt the grip on his left wing, felt something snap, as she twisted down.

He screamed, more in astonishment than pain. He dropped to the ground, hunching over, feeling bones grind together as the wing bent backward in a way it was never meant to. Then the pain hit, and he felt a pressure grow in his chest. Oh no. She was forcing him to shift. He resisted, digging his claws into his own palms with the effort. Then she twisted at the wing again and pain blotted out conscious thought.

And he was in groundling form, huddled on the ground, looking up at her. Agony came in shuddering waves, like half his body had been ripped away. This time his scream came out as a dry croak. The broken wing bones had transferred to his groundling form as breaks all up and down his left side, arm, collarbone, ribs, shoulder.

Ranea stood over him, dripping blood from claw-rents all over her body. She hissed in bitter amusement, and said, "What do you think your queens would say, if they knew all that I did to their court was for you?"

Through watering eyes, Moon saw the curving wall of the hive

behind her, and two shapes dropping down toward them, one gold and one blue. "Ask them," he gasped.

Ranea turned. Jade and Pearl hit her as one, taking her up off the ground and over Moon's head, slamming her into a pillar. Pearl got knocked away by the impact but Jade held on as she and Ranea fell to the ground. Jade landed on her back, Ranea atop her. But the Fell queen fought to get away, keening, and he could see Jade's claws sunk into her back, her throat. Pearl shoved to her feet, strode toward them. She slapped Ranea's wings aside, planted a foot on her back, and seized her head in both hands. The snap and the noise of ripping flesh was clearly audible.

Moon struggled to stay conscious just long enough to see Jade shove the headless body aside, and stagger to her feet, shaking blood out of her spines and head frills.

That's finished, he thought, and gave in to the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Moon knew he was being carried, that they were in the air. He could hear vague snatches of shouts, the roar of fire, the angry buzz of the Dwei. But it was all mercifully far away. Then they were inside somewhere, and he was being lowered to the ground, and the pull on his broken bones snapped him back to painful reality. He rode out the shuddering waves of agony, and bit his lip bloody, trying not to scream. The room swam into focus. He lay on his back in soft sand. Above him was the arch of a golden stone ceiling, the wall just below it painted with a faded tracery of green and blue. Jade leaned over him, her eyes desperate. There was a smear of Ranea's blood on her forehead, claw rents in her scales. "Moon, I can't let you shift. Do you understand?"

He understood. He was too weak, and shifting in this state would probably kill him. He wanted to tell her that it didn't matter, that he was dying anyway, but he remembered that she didn't know about the fledglings.

"The children?" Taking a breath to talk made his ribs grind together. "The Sky Copper clutch—"

"They're safe. Pearl has them," she said. Her hand lifted as if she wanted to touch him, but didn't dare.

Moon heard running footsteps, then Heart crouched beside him. Merit stood behind her, peering anxiously over her shoulder. Heart put her hands on Moon's face and he must have tensed, because the pain welled up and took everything away again.

He came back to dizzy consciousness, feeling as if a little time had passed. Jade was still there, sitting beside Heart, saying urgently, "Moon, just relax. She's trying to put you into a healing sleep."

Heart shook her head in despair. "I just can't do it, Jade. He's older than I am, and very strong, and I don't think he trusts me. All I can do is try to help with the pain." Heart pressed her thumb lightly on Moon's forehead, just above his nose. Warmth spread through his body and Moon felt his muscles unlock. She asked him, "Is that any better?"

“Yes...” He faded out, an inexpressible relief.

After that, everything was a blur. He slipped in and out of consciousness. His mouth was dry and sandy, and the back of his throat was on fire. Someone tried to give him water, but it hurt too much to swallow. He heard movement, footsteps, Aeriats coming and going. He wasn't certain if Jade was still here.

He heard a fragment of conversation, Chime talking to Heart and Merit about what had happened at the colony. As far as Chime knew, the Arbora and Aeriats imprisoned in the sacs were all reviving, including the fledglings and clutches, but they had been terribly weak and in need of food and clean water. After making certain there were no Fell left behind, Pearl had followed Jade and the others in pursuit of the kethel. She had caught up with Jade at the ruined city, in time to help with the plan to fill the jars with metal-mud, to set the hive on fire, and force the Fell into the open.

Then from somewhere nearby, Moon heard Root say worriedly, “What are they doing? Why are they angry at us?”

“We set their hive on fire, Root. What do you think?” That was Floret, or Coil.

“They want us to leave?” That was Song.

“They say they're going to attack if we don't go. Pearl said—”

“Quiet.” That was Pearl.

But Moon had heard enough. They were taking shelter in the ruin, and the Dwei were trying to drive them off. It must mean the Fell were already gone, killed or scattered when they realized the rulers had vanished and Ranea was dead.

He opened his eyes and saw Chime sitting next to him, in groundling form. Chime leaned over him anxiously. “Moon, you're awake? Don't try to move.”

“Don't...” Don't leave, he wanted to say, but that was pointless. They had the Arbora and the kids to worry about. He croaked out, “Before you leave, kill me, all right?”

“We're not leaving, and we're not killing anybody, except those damn Dwei, if they don't leave us alone.” Chime looked up, grimacing in frustration. “Heart—”

Moon remembered something else the others didn't know. “No, I have to tell you—”

“Moon, just rest—”

“Fell crossbreeds,” he managed. “There could be more.” That silenced even Chime. With frequent gasps for air, he repeated what Ranea had said, told them about Janeas leaving with the old progenitor and Venras, that the other mentor-dakti was dead. He knew the others were drawing near to listen, though his vision was beginning to blur and he couldn’t bear to move his head to see who was there. He finished, “And they came to Indigo Cloud for me. The mentordakti knew I’d be there.”

He felt there should be some reaction to that, but he had closed his eyes from the effort of speaking so long, and when he opened them again everyone was gone.

Not quite everyone. Pearl sat near him. Time must have passed again because it was night, and a fire burned nearby, casting half her face in shadow. The night should be cool, but his skin felt as if it was radiating heat.

He rasped out, “Are you going to kill me?” He didn’t think he was asking a lot. He was dying anyway, and they would have to leave soon; the least they could do was not leave him for the Dwei or the desert scavengers.

“It’s a thought.” Pearl turned her head to look down at him. She was in Aeriad form, the light catching the brilliant gold of her spines. “You’ve caused us enough trouble. It’s either kill you or make you pay for it in clutches.”

“Pick one and get it over with.”

She cocked her head. “But it doesn’t occur to you to call out for Jade.”

“There’s no one out there. The others are dead.” Then Moon thought, Wait, where am I?

Pearl frowned, laying the back of her hand against his cheek. “Merit, go and wake Heart.”

That was when Moon gave up trying to talk. Even he could tell that what he was saying didn’t make sense, and it hurt too much to make the effort.

The next time he was really aware of anything, it was daylight again, and he heard Chime shouting, “Stone’s here!”

Good, Moon thought. Stone was practical. I can talk him into killing me.

But the next person to lean over him was Flower. Her hair was tangled and wild, as if she had let Stone carry her in groundling form.

She cupped her hands around his face and said, "Moon, it's all right. Just relax."

This time when he sank into darkness, it was deep and silent.

Moon dreamed he was swimming in a black sea, too far under, trying to find the surface. Something in the darkness below grabbed his ankle and yanked him down, and the dream-jolt made him twitch awake. Blinking at the dusty ceiling, he took a sharp breath, braced for pain. It came, but not in the overwhelming wave he vividly remembered.

His left arm was bent and strapped across his chest; not moving it the least little bit seemed a very good idea. His shoulder and collarbone alternately throbbed and burned, like hot metal buried beneath his skin, and the ribs on that side stabbed him every time he took a breath. His skin felt dry and too hot. His clothes were soaked with sweat. Carefully, he moved his feet, and bent one leg a little. That was probably a good sign.

"Moon, you're awake?"

That was Flower, sitting nearby. It was reassuring that he hadn't imagined her earlier. He wet his lips. "Sort of." His voice still sounded pitifully weak.

"You've been in a healing sleep for the past three days." Flower laid a cool hand on his forehead. It felt so good he closed his eyes again. Then she said, "We're getting ready to leave. The flying boats are here."

He blinked. "Our flying boats?"

"Yes. Niran is steering one, and he showed Blossom how to steer the other." She brushed the hair back from his forehead. "When Stone woke up and was able to shift, he thought it best to get the court away from the colony as quickly as possible. We loaded everyone onto the two boats, with as much of our supplies as we could salvage. Fortunately the Arbora had already started to get ready to leave before the Fell attacked. Most of the really necessary tools and things were packed in baskets in the lower part of the colony. Stone and I came ahead to see if you all had found the stolen Arbora yet."

Moon could hear the wind outside, wailing through the hollows of the ruin. "What about the Dwei? I thought they were going to attack us."

"Stone persuaded them not to," Flower said, with irony in her voice.

From somewhere behind him, Chime said, "Actually he told them

they could leave us alone and we'd be gone in a few days, or he could tear what was left of their hive apart and kill them all." Chime moved into view, looking around the room. His clothes were dusty and his cheek was smeared with dirt. "Are we ready to go?"

"Very ready," Flower told him. She pulled a leather pack into her lap, sorting through it. "Is Jade on her way?"

Moon took a deep breath and rolled onto his good arm. His back protested with a stabbing sensation that took his breath away. When the room swam back into focus, he heard Flower say in exasperation, "Moon, what are you doing?"

"I'm sitting up." Gritting his teeth, he levered himself into a sitting position with his good arm. Oh, that hurts. Bones ground against each other in ways they weren't meant to, his vision went dark, and his stomach tried to turn. After a moment the wave passed, and he swayed, but managed to stay upright. He let out his breath, careful not to jostle his ribs. It felt odd to be sitting up, and he remembered Flower had said something about three days. The room was bigger than he had thought, with an arched doorway that looked out onto an open court strewn with rubble. The wind stirred the drifted sand up into whirling patterns.

Chime hovered over him anxiously. "Just stay still! Jade will be here any moment."

That was the point. Moon wanted to prove he could walk to the boats, even if he would need help to get up into one. He just hoped the boats were very, very close.

Then Jade landed in the sandy court with Vine, Floret, and Song. She folded her wings, stopped in the doorway to shake the sand off her scales, then strode into the room. She looked at Moon and demanded, "Why is he sitting up?"

Flower told her pointedly, "Because he's a bit too delicate at the moment for me to wrestle with." She pulled a folded drape of fabric out of the pack and handed it to Jade.

"I was going to walk to the boats," Moon said, feeling as if things were moving too fast for him. He couldn't see any remnant of the scratches Ranea had left on Jade's arms and chest.

"Of course you were." She knelt, shaking out the drape and carefully wrapping it around his shoulders. It was soft, and the scent of sweet herbs was trapped in the folds. "Put your arm around my neck."

He did, threading it through her spines. She slipped an arm under

his legs, gathered him gently against her and stood up. She carried him out to the court, and murmured, "Brace yourself."

He tightened his hold on her neck and set his jaw. The jolt as she took to the air made him suck in a breath, but the flight was brief, and the light thump as she landed on the deck didn't hurt. He caught a glimpse of the fan-sails, tightly folded up against the mast, and a crowd of Arbora milling around on the deck. Claws scraped wood as they hurried to clear a path for Jade. As she carried Moon down the narrow stair below deck, he heard Niran yell instructions about casting off.

She took him into the nearest cabin and carefully put him down on a pallet of silk blankets and cushions. It was wonderfully soft, if not as warm as the sand in the ruin. The ceiling and walls were dark wood, rubbed fine until the grain showed. Glowing moss was stuffed into a clear glass lamp meant to hold a candle, and baskets, the tightly-woven ones used at the colony for storage, were packed in against the walls, taking up much of the space. Jade crouched next to him, arranging the blankets. He said, "You know the Fell came to Indigo Cloud for me."

Jade shook her head. "Don't worry about that."

That wasn't exactly an answer, and he tried to muster the strength to pursue it, but Flower came into the cabin, telling Jade, "Everyone's aboard, and they've gotten the water casks refilled." The boat trembled and swayed, and she caught hold of a basket to steady herself.

Jade bared her teeth. "If that was the Dwei, I'm going to tear their—"

Chime ducked into the cabin, dumping an armload of leather packs atop a basket. "That was Stone, trying to land on the boat without knocking the mast down."

"I need to be up there." Jade touched Moon's face. "Rest."

As if he had a choice. He watched her leave the cabin, taking the stairs up to the deck in one bound. The brief exertion of sitting up and then being carried here had already exhausted him, made him feel as if he was trapped under water again, fighting the weight of the moss nets. He managed to ask, "The boats are going to the new colony?"

"Yes, finally!" Chime waved his hands, excited. "We can't wait to see it."

He ducked out of the room and Moon sunk further down into the cushions, muttering, "Good for you."

Flower sat next to him, propping her chin on her hand. "Moon, you are going to fly again."

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She put her hand on his forehead. "Now rest."

It didn't matter if Flower's "rest" had something in it other than just the word. Staying awake was too much of an effort. It was easy to just relax into sleep.

Moon woke sometime later to find a dark-haired little boy in groundling form leaning over him, staring with grave intensity. After a puzzled moment, Moon recognized Thorn, the older Sky Copper consort.

From nearby, Stone said, "See? He didn't go away." Thorn patted Moon on the nose. "Gently. Remember what I said."

Moon turned his head carefully. Stone sat on the floor a few paces away. He looked much better than the last time Moon had seen him. The bruises were gone. The edge of the claw-wound above the open collar of his shirt had lost its red, raw look and turned to scar tissue.

"We didn't believe you," Frost informed Stone, with the air of conceding a highly contested point. The fledgling queen leaned against Stone's side, and the smaller consort, Bitter, sat in his lap. The boys both wore clothes that were too big for them, and Frost wore a string of bright blue and gold beads. "The others all went away."

"I know you didn't believe me." Stone lifted Bitter out of his lap and told Moon, "They wanted to be with you, but we were afraid they would keep you awake or jostle you. The teachers have been taking care of them with the other clutches."

Bitter crawled onto the pallet next to Moon and curled up against him. Moon automatically folded his good arm around him. He noticed someone had taken his admittedly filthy clothes away and replaced them with a soft, heavy robe, and the strap around his broken arm had been changed. He hadn't had anyone take care of him since Sorrow had died, and it felt... odd. He wasn't used to depending on anybody else, for anything.

"Bitter says we're your clutch now," Thorn said to Moon. "Even if you don't have a queen." Against Moon's side, Bitter nodded confirmation.

Still half-asleep, Moon blinked at that one. He wasn't sure the court was going to go for that idea. "Uh..."

"You found us," Frost said, as if that settled the argument.

Moon decided to leave it be for now. He asked Stone, "Did they see what happened at their colony?"

"Yes." Stone ruffled Thorn's hair. "Bell said they come out with it at odd moments." He added, "And we're not calling that boy 'Bitter.'"

"It's his name," Moon said, feeling on safer ground with this one. He told Bitter, "Your name is whatever you want it to be."

Frost said, "His real name is Bitter Starshell. It's a flower that only comes out at night."

"We can call him Star," Stone said, as if that settled it.

"I'm not going to argue with you." Moon tried to make it a threat. There were more things he wanted to ask, but maybe not in front of the fledglings. Besides, it was still an effort to stay awake.

Stone took them away when Moon started to drift again. Moon spent most of the next two days unconscious, lulled by the gentle movement of the flying boat. Flower said it was the remnants of the healing sleep, but Moon couldn't stay awake long enough to get more information. Every time he asked someone a question, he fell asleep before he could hear the answer.

But then he woke one night, to cool, damp air that smelled of fresh water and green plants, and he felt more awake than he had since Ranea tried to snap his wing off. It didn't hurt to breathe, and his bones felt less mobile, more attached to each other; that had to be an improvement.

The glowing moss stuffed into the ship's candle holder showed him a pile of cushions and blankets on the other side of the room, with at least three sleeping people. Squinting, he made out Flower, Chime, and Heart.

The opportunity for escape was too tempting to pass up. Moon disentangled his robe from the blankets, rolled onto his good arm, and levered himself up. Standing, with one hand on the wall to steady himself, he still felt delicate, and his joints ached.

He made it across the floor without waking anyone, and out the open door. A narrow hall led into the small maze below decks. Other doors opened off of it, and he could hear a lot of people breathing deeply in sleep, and further away, low voices. Above his head, the hatch to the deck was open, giving a view of a star-filled night sky and letting in the cool air. The stairway was steep but narrow enough to let him brace himself against the wall as he climbed. He made it up onto the deck with only a minimum of awkward, painful bumping.

The ship sailed serenely through the night, the nearly-full moon

high in the sky. The fan-sail was closed, and the breeze was light, heavily laden with the scent of fresh water. There were sleeping bodies on deck, too, most in groundling form, all wrapped in blankets. Baskets and bundles were tied off to every available spot. Far up in the bow, under the lamp, an Arbora was on watch. Looking up at the watch post at the top of the mast, Moon could see a couple of Aeriat stationed there too. The other ship was a little ahead of them, just off their port bow. Moon picked his way to the starboard rail, and leaned on it to look down.

They were passing over a vast lake, perhaps fifty paces above it, the water gleaming silver in the moonlight. Trees with delicate, feathery leaves grew up out of the lake, some nearly tall enough to brush the bottom of the hull. The water was clear enough to see brightly-colored fish flickering through it.

Moon lifted his head, the breeze tugging at his hair and his robe. He could see the distant shore, heavily forested, featureless in the dark, except for the occasional spreading shade tree taller than the rest.

He heard a quiet step behind him and glanced back. It was Niran, making his way across the deck. He leaned against the rail next to Moon. Keeping his voice low, he said, "You are feeling better, then? They said you were gravely injured."

"I was. We heal fast." Moon looked out over the lake again. He had heard enough from the others to know they had some specific destination in mind, that they were headed to an old colony somewhere that Stone knew of. "Where are we?"

The question sounded a little desperate to his ears, but Niran didn't seem to notice. "We're going southwest. That's all I can say." He shook his head. "My family has never come this far inland before, and our maps are blank, except for my track of our progress."

Moon tried to remember what Stone had said. Eleven days of fast flight, just to get out of the river valleys? "So we don't know if there are cities out here."

Niran shrugged. "Presumably there are. Somewhere."

Moon sank against the railing, wincing as his arm and shoulder throbbed. He had no idea what his status with the court was, if they were angry because he had brought the Fell down on them, or willing to forgive him because he had found Frost and her brothers, or what Pearl's attitude would be. He vaguely remembered asking Pearl to kill him, and her declining, but he wasn't sure if anything had changed. He was fairly certain Jade didn't want him dead, but there was a big

difference between that and wanting him as her consort.

Niran cleared his throat. "Once we reach our destination, Stone has said that a winged group will accompany me back, so I may return with both ships at once." He paused, watching Moon thoughtfully. "My family owes you a debt, and I know my grandfather would be pleased to see you again."

"You don't owe me a debt." But having the option to return to the Golden Isles, and the extra time to recover, was a relief. A big relief. "But thank you. I'll... keep it in mind."

Niran went back to his post. Moon stayed by the railing, watching the reflections off the water, and listening to everyone sleep.

After a time, Chime wandered up out of the hatch, scratching his head. He spotted Moon at the railing and came over, saying with exasperated concern, "You're not supposed to be up. If you get sick—"

Moon had remembered one of the questions he needed an answer to. "Do you know how Petal died?"

"Oh." Chime hesitated. He stepped to the railing. "Yes, Bell told me." He fidgeted uncertainly. "Do you want to go back down?"

"No, we'll wake Flower and Heart. I want to stay up here."

They sat down on baskets against the outside wall of the steering cabin because no one was sleeping there.

Chime told him that forty-seven Raksura had died in the attack on the colony, mostly soldiers, several Aeriats, and one teacher, Petal. Chime said miserably, "Bell said they were in the nurseries when the dakti broke in, and she just flung herself at them. She thought they were going to kill the clutches, and she was trying to give the other teachers a chance to carry them away. They did get some out of the nurseries, but the kethel had blocked the way outside, and they couldn't shift, so they were trapped."

Moon leaned against the cabin wall, not sure whether he was more sad or angry. Petal hadn't had any reason to think that the dakti wouldn't kill the clutches. And if she had known what plans the Fell had had for them, she might not have acted any differently.

"Do we know why the Fell left the bodies? Why they didn't eat them?"

Chime looked troubled at the memory. "Not for certain, but Knell said the mentor-dakti was angry that so many of the court were killed. Maybe it was punishing the dakti by not letting them touch the bodies."

Ranea had said Erasmus wanted to go to the colony even though it wasn't safe. "Maybe he watched you all so long he thought he was part of you."

"Ugh," Chime said, succinctly.

Moon wasn't happy with that thought either. He changed the subject. "What about Balm?"

Chime shook his head. "She's been staying on the other ship. She thinks this is all her fault."

That was ridiculous. "It's not her fault. She's not responsible for what the Fell did to her."

"Yes, and..." Chime prompted.

Moon frowned at him. "What?"

"Neither are you. I know you feel that way. You keep telling everyone that the Fell came for you. You could barely talk, and you told us that."

Moon looked out over the railing, at the slowly approaching shore. Glowing night bugs played around the tops of the water-trees, sparking in the dark. He had told them because he wanted them to know, because he didn't want their sympathy when they should be condemning him. "Chime..."

Exasperated, Chime said, "So it's your fault for being born a consort and being alone, and making a good target. It's Balm's fault for getting caught by the Fell, and Pearl's fault for trying to fend them off on her own, and Flower and the other mentors' fault for not finding out what was wrong with the colony, and Stone's fault for not coming back sooner to make us move, and Jade's fault for being too young to force Pearl to act. I can go on. Sky Copper's fault for being taken by surprise, and destroyed, and not being there to help us when we needed it."

Moon twitched uneasily, wincing when the motion pulled at his abused muscles. "All right, I see what you mean," he admitted, still begrudging it.

Chime sighed. "There's some that won't see it that way. But I don't think you should be one of them."

A low warm voice said, "Neither do I."

Moon tilted his head back, gingerly, to look up. Jade was perched on the edge of the cabin roof, looking down at them, blue and silver in the moonlight.

He was going to answer, and then he sneezed, and the jolt shot right through him. He would have fallen off the basket, but Chime lunged forward and caught him around the waist. "See, this is why we didn't want you out here. We're susceptible to lung-ailments."

Jade hopped down from the cabin roof and scooped Moon up in her arms. "I can walk," he protested, trying to make it a growl. Admittedly, it was a pitiful growl.

"I know. But you don't have to," Jade said, and carried him back down below deck.

Moon got a little more sleep that night, and did not catch a lung ailment and die immediately, despite Chime and Heart's dire predictions. But the morning seemed to stretch on forever. The good thing about being semi-conscious was that it had kept him from being bored. Now that he was alert again, there was nothing to do but sit around and wait to get well enough to shift.

In the afternoon, Stone brought Frost, Thorn, and Bitter again, which was a welcome diversion. Bitter and Thorn play-stalked each other, growling in a way that made them sound like furious bees, while Frost sat aloof and Stone said things like, "Do not flap your wings in here. You'll kill somebody."

People had been moving around up on deck all day, and Moon had mostly ignored it. From what he could glimpse, it was a bright clear day and everyone would be out enjoying it. Then he felt the boat slow, the wood creaking and groaning in protest. Moon shoved himself up on his good arm. "What's that?"

The fledglings must have heard the tension in his voice. They all froze, heads cocked to listen, but Stone looked unconcerned. "They're slowing down and pulling over to the other boat, so the whole court can have a meeting."

Reassured by Stone's attitude, Frost settled her spines. The consorts went back to their game, Thorn rolling onto his back so Bitter could pounce on him. Moon frowned at the ceiling. He was missing everything down here. "A meeting about what?"

Stone tugged on Frost's frills. Apparently feeling that her dignity was being abused, she ducked away and batted at his hand. Stone said, "About you, Moon."

"About—oh." Moon sank back into the cushions. He must have looked just as uneasy as he felt, because Frost came over and sat on the pallet next to him. Moon asked, "Why aren't you up there?"

"Everybody already knows what I think," Stone said. If Moon was

supposed to know what that was, he had no idea. Stone wore his best unreadable expression. “Besides, Jade and Pearl are going to fight, and I don’t want them to postpone it on my account.”

“A fight?” Moon stared at him, incredulous and beginning to get mad. “And you’re not going to do anything about it?”

Stone snorted. “Moon, queens fight. It’s normal. And these two have a lot of disagreements to work out.” He shrugged. “It’ll be fine. The Arbora wouldn’t like it if they went too far, and they both know it.”

Moon looked at the ceiling again. He couldn’t hear anything but movement, and muffled voices. “It matters that much to them what the Arbora think?”

Stone leaned over to help Bitter pry his trapped claws out of a floorboard.

“I told you, the Arbora run the court. They find food, raise the clutches, help fight, make everything we need. They don’t like it if queens fight too much, or if consorts are unhappy.”

Moon’s shoulder was throbbing again and he made himself relax, leaning back on the cushions. “So if the Arbora wanted me to stay, Pearl couldn’t force me out?”

Stone sighed in exasperation. “Moon, Pearl wants you as her consort. That’s what they’re going to fight about.”

It was either a joke, or Stone actually was crazy. “Pearl hates me. A lot.”

“She hates you as a potential consort for Jade. As her consort, it would be different,” Stone explained, not patiently. “Whatever happens, you’ll be first consort, the consort that speaks for the others. First consorts don’t have to be mated to the reigning queen. It’s just the way it usually works out.” He shook his head, and admitted, “I didn’t expect Pearl to want you. But after all these turns of not taking much interest in anything, including running the court, she’s woken up and decided to be the reigning queen again. I guess she woke up and decided she wanted a consort, too. Jade is taking exception to that.”

Moon still had trouble imagining it. But after the attack on the colony, Flower had said something about Pearl wanting him. At best, he had thought Flower was badly misreading the situation. So maybe it was me badly misreading the situation. That was nothing new, and it put several things in a different light. It explained River’s increasing hostility. And Pearl telling Moon that Jade had lied about getting a

clutch. She was angry, because you told her you slept with Jade. He had known Pearl was trying to divide them; he had just been wrong about why. Idiot.

Frost glared at Moon. “You need a queen. Otherwise you’ll just cause trouble.”

Stone said, “Trust me, this is a good thing. For a long time, Indigo Cloud didn’t have a real queen. Now we’ve got Pearl back, and Jade’s taking her rightful place as sister queen and heir.”

Noise rose and fell up on deck. Whatever was going on, everybody seemed to have an opinion about it. Disgruntled, Moon said, “What about what I want?”

“Eventually it’ll occur to them to check on that,” Stone said, with irony. “It’s not really about you. Like I said, they have a lot between them to work out.”

Time dragged, and Moon fidgeted and tried to watch the fledglings play and ignore the urge to question Stone. Finally, Jade came down the stairs and into the cabin. Her spines were ruffled but she didn’t look hurt.

“All settled?” Stone asked her.

“Yes.” Jade gave him a dark look. Apparently Moon wasn’t the only one half-convinced that this was somehow all Stone’s fault.

Then Frost stuck her claws in Moon’s sleeve and hissed at Jade. “Mine.”

Jade crouched down to get eye level with her. After about three heartbeats, Frost let go of Moon and shifted to Arbora, then retreated to climb into Stone’s lap. From that safe vantage point, she hissed at Jade again. Stone patted her reassuringly, saying, “I think this one’s going to be a handful.”

“Yes, that’s all I need.” Jade sat beside Moon, her thigh warm against his side.

Torn between relief and annoyance, Moon said, “I’m not going to ask if you won. Apparently it’s none of my business.”

“You can tell he’s feeling better because he’s getting all mouthy again,” Stone told Jade.

Jade cocked her head at him. “Line-grandfather, could you take the clutch back to the teachers?”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Stone agreed. He gathered up Frost and Thorn, while Bitter climbed up to cling to his shoulder.

“You need to find queens for Thorn and Bitter, and a consort for me,” Frost ordered.

“We’ll worry about that a little later,” Stone told her as he carried them out of the cabin.

Jade settled in comfortably next to Moon. She said, “There was talk of renaming the court, since so much has changed. Some of the hunters suggested Jade Moon, and I could see Pearl didn’t like that. I, thinking I was being diplomatic, suggested Pearl Rain.” Moon remembered that Rain had been Pearl’s consort, who had died turns ago. He hadn’t realized the courts were named after pairs of queens and consorts, but it made sense. Jade finished, “Then Pearl suggested Pearl Moon.” Her spines twitched at the memory.

He wasn’t going to ask if the others were going to accept him; as Chime had said, some would and some wouldn’t, and that was on Moon’s head, not Jade’s.

“What was the final decision?” he asked.

“We decided to keep Indigo Cloud.” She looked down at him, her eyes warm and serious all at once. “I can offer you the protection of a court, and hopefully a comfortable home, once we get where we’re going.”

After his last mistake, Moon wanted to be very specific about this. “As your consort?”

Jade sighed. “No, Moon, I thought we’d just be friends. After all, I just offered to rip Pearl’s head off over you.” She put her hand on his chest, warm through the silk, and it made him want to crawl into her lap. “Yes, as my consort.”

He was feeling guilty about Pearl. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” Jade said, her voice dry. “She has River and plenty of other warriors to lick her wounds.” She shook her frills back. “There wasn’t very much actual clawing, just screaming.”

There was one thing he wanted to ask her, though now he thought he already knew the answer. He was beginning to get a better idea of how Raksuran courts worked, but he wanted to be certain. “Why didn’t you do the scent-thing on me?”

“I told you I wanted you to go to Wind Sun, if we couldn’t free the court. It would have been harder for them to find a queen for you if you were already taken.” She eyed him. “Why?”

He wasn’t going to tell her and re-start the whole fight with Pearl. “No reason.” Then he realized he hadn’t answered her question yet

and said, “Yes.”

“Yes?”

He buried his face against her neck, suddenly self-conscious. “Yes, I’ll be your consort.”

“Good.” She sounded relieved, and a little overcome, as if there had been doubt. And there had been, but it didn’t seem to matter now. She ran her fingers through his hair. “Do you want anything? Jewels, gold...”

Apparently she was serious. “Fish?”

Appendix I

Excerpt from Observations of the Raksura: Volume Thirty-Seven
of A Natural History by scholar-preeminent Delin-Evran-lindel

The Two Breeds of the Raksura

Arbora: Arbora have no wings but are agile climbers, and their scales appear in a variety of colors. They have long tails, sharp retractable claws, and manes of flexible spines and soft “frills,” characteristics that are common to all Raksura. They are expert artisans and are dexterous and creative in the arts they pursue for the court’s greater good. In their alternate form they are shorter than Aeriats Raksura and have stocky, powerful builds. Both male and female Arbora are fertile, and sometimes may have clutches that include warrior fledglings. This is attributed to queens and consorts blending their bloodlines with Arbora over many generations.

The four castes of the Arbora are:

Teachers - They supervise the nurseries and train the young of the court. They are also the primary artisans of the court, and tend the gardens that will be seen around any Raksuran colony.

Hunters -They take primary responsibility for providing food for the court. This includes hunting for game, and gathering wild plants.

Soldiers - They “guard the ground” and protect the colony and the surrounding area.

Mentors - They are Arbora born with arcane powers, who have skill in healing and augury. They also act as historians and record-keepers for the court, and usually advise the queens.

Aeriat: The winged Raksura. Like the Arbora, they have long tails, sharp retractable claws, and manes of flexible spines and soft frills.

Warriors - They act as scouts and guardians, and defend the colony from threats from the air, such as the Fell. Warriors are sterile and cannot breed, though they appear as male and female forms. Their scales are in any number of bright colors. Female warriors are usually somewhat stronger than male warriors. In their alternate form, they are always tall and slender. They are not as long-lived generally as queens, consorts, and Arbora.

Consorts -Consorts are fertile males, and their scales are always black, though there may be a tint or “undersheen” of gold, bronze, or blood red. At maturity they are stronger than warriors, and may be the longest lived of any Raksura. They are also the fastest and most powerful flyers, and this ability increases as they grow older. There is some evidence to suggest that consorts of great age may grow as large or larger than the major kethel of the Fell.

Queens - Queens are fertile females, and are the most powerful and deadly fighters of all the Aeriati. Their scales have two brilliant colors, the second in a pattern over the first. The queens’ alternate form resembles an Arbora, with no wings, but retaining the tail, and an abbreviated mane of spines and the softer frills. Queens mate with consorts to produce royal clutches, composed of queens, consorts, and warriors.

Appendix II

Excerpt from Additions to the List of Predatory Species by scholar-eminent-posthumous Venar-Inram-Alil.

Fell are migratory and prey on other intelligent species.

The Known Classes of Fell

Major kethel - The largest of the Fell, sometimes called harbingers, major kethel are often the first sign that a Fell flight is approaching. Their scales are black, like that of all the Fell, and they have an array of horns around their heads. They have a low level of intelligence and are believed to be always under the control of the rulers.

Minor dakti -The dakti are small, with armor plates on the back and shoulders, and webbed wings. They are somewhat cunning, but not much more intelligent than kethel, and fight in large swarms.

Rulers -Rulers are intelligent creatures that are believed to have some arcane powers of entrancement over other species. Rulers related by blood are also believed to share memories and experiences through some mental bond. They have complete control of the lesser Fell in their flights, and at times can speak through dakti and see through their eyes. (Addendum by scholar-preeminent Delin-Evran-lindel: Fell rulers in their winged form bear an unfortunate and superficial resemblance to Raksuran Consorts.)

There is believed to be a fourth class, or possibly a female variant of the Rulers, called the Progenitors.

Common lore holds that if a Fell ruler is killed, its head must be removed and stored in a cask of salt or yellow mud and buried on land in order to prevent drawing other Fell rulers to the site of its death. It is possible that only removing the head from the corpse may be enough to prevent this, but burying it is held to be the safest course.

THE SERPENT SEA

MARTHA WELLS

VOLUME TWO OF THE BOOKS OF RAKSURA

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To Janna Silverstein

Chapter One

Moon had been consort to Jade, sister queen of the Indigo Cloud Court, for eleven days and nobody had tried to kill him yet. He thought it was going well so far.

On the twelfth day, the dawn sun was just breaking through the clouds when he walked out onto the deck of the *Valendera*. The air was damp and pleasantly cool, filled with the scent of the dense green forest the ship flew over. It was early enough that sleeping bodies still crowded the deck, most of them buried under blankets or piled up against the baskets and bags that held all the court's belongings. A few people stirred somewhere toward the bow, where the look-outs were posted. On the central mast, the fan-shaped sails were still closed. Their companion ship, the *Indala*, floated a short distance off the starboard side, pacing them.

Moon heard someone stumble up the narrow stairs from below decks. Then Chime climbed out of the hatch and squinted at the dawn light. He said, "Oh good. Another nice day to spend on this flying torture device."

Moon had been having variations on this conversation for days. Raksura weren't meant to live on flying boats—that had been very well established by everybody—but there was no other way to move the court to the new colony.

Indigo Cloud had been in decline for a long time before Moon had arrived, with outbreaks of disease, attacks by predators, and the Fell influence that had caused fewer warrior births. When the Fell attack had forced them to finally abandon the old colony, there hadn't been enough warriors to move the court in the normal way. Everyone knew they had been lucky to convince a Golden Islander trading family to let them pay for the use of the two flying boats. But while the *Valendera* was over two hundred paces long and the *Indala* only a little smaller, there just wasn't enough room to do much of anything but sleep or sit. The situation was the worst for the wingless Arbora, who were used to spending their days hunting, tending their gardens, or in carving, weaving, or working metal. When the Aeriats were sick of the cramped quarters, they could always go flying.

Moon said, “Do you need me to say anything or do you just want me to stand here?”

“Yes, yes, I know, I know.” Chime rubbed his eyes and glared at the lightening sky. Moon and Chime were both Aeriats Raksura, but Chime was a warrior and Moon was a consort. In their groundling forms there wasn’t much difference between them; they were both tall and lean, both had the dark bronze skin common to many Raksura. Moon had dark hair and green eyes, and was used to blending in with real groundlings. Chime had fluffy, straw-colored hair, and had never had to live outside the closeknit court, though he had his own unique problem to deal with. Chime added, “I just can’t wait until we get to the Reaches. I’ve read all the old histories, but actually seeing it... Stone says we’re nearly there.”

Stone had been saying they were nearly there for three days, but Stone’s idea of “nearly” was different than anyone else’s. Moon just lifted a brow. Chime sighed, and said, “Yes, I know.”

They stood there a moment while Chime continued to grumble and Moon just enjoyed the predawn quiet. All everyone wanted to talk about, when they weren’t complaining about the conditions on the boats, was how excited they were to be going to the new colony. Courts didn’t move very often; Stone was the only one who could remember the last time Indigo Cloud had moved, turns and turns before any of the others had been born. But Moon had never looked at any place with the idea of living there forever. It was daunting, and he couldn’t even pretend to share everyone’s enthusiasm.

Moon felt something watching him, something not friendly. He looked toward the *Indala* and saw River, Drift, and two other warriors crouched along the railing, staring at him and Chime. They were all in Raksuran form, River’s green scales catching the morning light and reflecting their blue undersheen. River twitched his mane of spines and frills, a not-quite-deliberate challenge.

Now that Moon was Jade’s consort, River’s place as the lover of Pearl, the reigning queen, was safe. But it didn’t mean they were friends now.

Instead of hissing, Moon yawned, stretched extravagantly, and tried to look like a tempting target. A fight with a half-Fell half-Raksuran queen had left him with broken bones, but Raksura healed fast, and he was mostly recovered now. Though he was still a little stiff, especially in the mornings. A couple of days ago the mentors had all agreed that he was well enough to be up and around, and had given him his clothes back. The dark shirt and pants he had borrowed when he had first arrived at the colony were a little the worse for

wear but cleaned of dirt and dried blood. Since then he had shifted a few times, and had done some easy flying around the boats, but nothing more strenuous yet. Beating River senseless and throwing him off the *Indala* would be a good test to see just how healthy Moon was.

But River didn't take the bait, just lashed his tail in contempt and looked away.

"What are they looking at?" Chime said, but he faced toward the *Valendera's* bow, and hadn't noticed River and his cronies. Halfway down the deck, Bone, the chief of the *Arbora's* hunter caste, and several other *Arbora* stood at the railing and stared down at something. Chime picked his way across the deck, stepping around the sleeping bodies. Any diversion being welcome, Moon followed him.

All the *Arbora* were shorter than the *Aeriat* and more heavily built in their groundling forms. Bone, despite the age revealed by his white hair and the ashy cast to his bronze-brown skin, was still heavily muscled and strong. He had a ridge of old scar tissue circling his neck, where something with big teeth had nearly bitten his head off.

Moon leaned on the railing next to him. All the *Arbora* tasted the air, their expressions intent. "What is it?"

Bone nudged him with an elbow and pointed. "There."

They had been flying over increasingly dense forest for several days, the trees rising and falling in waves of vivid green fifty or so paces below the wooden hulls of the ships. Now a big shallow lake was just coming into view over the gently waving tops of the plume trees. A large herd of furry grasseaters grazed there, eating the reeds and flowering plants that grew in the water. Moon's stomach growled; they had been able to hunt sporadically along the way, but for most of the trip they had been living off dwindling stores of salted meat, dried fruit, and wilting roots. And it felt like forever since he had been able to hunt.

The hard line of Bone's mouth quirked in a smile. "I think everyone could do with a little fresh meat."

One of the other *Arbora* snorted at the depth of that understatement.

Moon caught hold of the railing and slung himself up to crouch on it. He said, "Tell the others." He leapt away from the boat, shifted to *Raksuran* form in midair and caught the wind.



Moon flew a long slow circle over the lake, playing the cool

morning wind against his wings, to stretch his muscles and make certain he was well enough to stoop and dive. He didn't want to be the first to fall on the herd, meaning to leave it to one of the others.

He had been a child the last time he had lived with his own people, so young he hadn't known what they were called or where they came from. And this was the first time in his travels through the Three Worlds that he had even lived with other shifters. He hadn't known anything about Raksura, and he hadn't known he was a consort, the only fertile male Aeriati, born to be mated to a queen and to produce royal clutches and infertile warriors for the court. He had a great deal of experience trying to fit into various groundling tribes and settlements, just in search of a place to live. But trying to fit into a group where he actually belonged, and had an important role, was... still daunting. He nursed a lingering fear that he was somehow going to wreck it and get thrown out of the court. It wasn't that odd a notion; he had gotten thrown out of a lot of places for various reasons.

By the time Moon had circled the lake twice, the decision had evidently been made to stop for a full-scale hunt. The two boats slowed to a crawl, then dropped lines. Arbora climbed down to tie them off to tall plume trees. All the Aeriati took the opportunity to jump off the boats and fly over the lake.

Aeriati didn't normally hunt for themselves unless they were traveling away from the colony; that was left to the Arbora hunters. Judging by everyone's enthusiastic response, this definitely counted as traveling away from the colony. They circled above the lake, their scales in shades of blue, green, gold, brown, and copper-red. They all had retractable claws on hands and feet, long tails with a spade shape on the end, and manes of spines and frills down their backs. Moon was the only one here with black scales, the color that marked him as a consort, though he had a faint undersheen of bronze that caught the morning light.

The Arbora's shifted forms looked much like the Aeriati, except they didn't have wings. They climbed down from the boats on rope ladders so they could butcher the kills on the grassy shore above the lake. Normally this was a task reserved for the hunters, but Moon could see Arbora who were members of the other three castes joining in; teachers, soldiers, even a couple of young mentors, Heart and Merit, leapt enthusiastically into the job. Just another sign that the long trip and confined quarters had worn on everyone.

Another group of Arbora went after some of the grasseaters that had retreated into the trees, and the younger ones dug through the shallows for clusters of edible roots. It was just as well all the work

could be done on the ground; early on in the journey, Niran, the groundling whose family owned both flying ships, had put his foot down about butchering kills on the ships' decks. Moon could see his point; nearly all the woodwork, from planks to railings to masts, was now scored with claw marks, and would need to be sanded down eventually.

Three warriors wheeled and dove on the herd, and the hunt was on. Moon found Chime, still a novice at hunting, and made sure he managed his first kill successfully. Then Moon took a small buck for himself. Like all the Aeriats, they dragged the carcasses off into the reeds to eat immediately; the second kill would be for the colony. They met Song, a young female warrior with coppery scales, already there eating her kill. "This was a fantastic idea," she said between bites.

After he finished eating, Moon left Chime with Song and swam out into the lake to wash the blood off his scales, then took a second kill to haul back for the Arbora. After he dragged the carcass up onto a sandbar to bleed it, he scanned the sky to see where the others were. Most of the Aeriats were finished, though Chime and a few others still circled above the lake looking for prey. The herd had all moved off now, either further down the shore or into the trees.

A flash of vivid blue made him glance up, but it wasn't Chime coming in for another pass. Jade cupped her wings and dropped down toward the sandbar.

She was the sister queen of the Indigo Cloud Court, and like all Raksuran queens, she had no groundling form. She could shift only between her winged form and a wingless shape that looked more like an Arbora. Her scales were blue, with a silver-gray web pattern. Behind her head, the frills and spines formed an elaborate mane, reaching all the way down her back to her tail.

She landed neatly, her claws digging into the sand. Folding her wings, she picked her way through the lilies toward Moon. He shifted for her, though he was still standing in the water and it soaked his pants to the knees. His groundling skin was more sensitive and he liked to feel her scales against it.

She caught him around the waist, and he relaxed against her. Her teeth grazed his neck in affectionate greeting, and she asked, "Did you have any trouble flying?"

"No, my shoulder's fine." He was a little sore, but it was the welcome ache of unused muscles finally being pushed to work. He nuzzled her neck. "My back's fine, too."

“I’m tempted to find out for myself.” Jade’s growl had a warm tone to it. She rubbed her cheek against his. “But we can’t afford the time.”

The grassy bank was very tempting, but she was right; they had to get the ships moving again. They hadn’t had much chance to be together onboard, between the crowding and Moon recovering from his broken wing. But now that Indigo Cloud had adopted a fledgling queen and two consorts from the destroyed Sky Copper court, it wasn’t quite so urgent that Jade get a clutch immediately.

Song, Root, and Chime banked down to circle overhead, and called to them that it was time to leave.



Later that afternoon, Moon woke when a strong cool gust cut across the flat roof of the *Valendera*’s steering cabin. It carried the clean scent of rain, but with a bitter undertone that meant thunder and lightning, and the force of it made the wooden craft creak and rattle.

Moon pushed up on one elbow for a better taste of the air. At the moment that was harder than it sounded. He was nestled between Jade and Chime, with Song, Root, and a few other warriors curled up around them. Jade had an arm and her tail wrapped around Moon’s waist and he was warm and comfortable from the sun-warmed wood and the heat of friendly bodies. He had to wriggle to sit up enough to look out over the wooden boat’s stern. What he saw made him wince. *That’s a problem.*

In the distance, just above the forest’s green horizon, a dark mass of storm built, reaching out toward them with gray streaks of cloud. On their journey so far, they had gone through a few days with rain, but no high winds or lightning. It looked like their luck was over.

Jade stirred sleepily, disturbed by his movement. Sounding reluctant to wake, she murmured, “What is it?” After the indulgence of the hunt this morning, most of the court were spending the day napping. Many had fed to the point where they wouldn’t need to eat again for two or three days.

Moon squeezed Jade’s wrist. “There’s a storm to the north.” “What?” She sat up, shouldered the others over enough that Root and another young male warrior rolled right off the cabin roof. She spotted the storm and frowned, then slapped her hand on the planks, making a loud hollow thump. “Niran! Come out here, please.”

Niran’s voice came from somewhere below. “What now?” He

sounded angry, but that was normal for Niran. He was the only groundling aboard, a grandson of the Golden Islander family who had traded them the use of the two flying boats. It had been Niran's grandfather, Delin, who had wanted to help them. Niran had distrusted the Raksura intensely, but had volunteered to stay and try to protect the valuable ships when the Fell had forced Delin and the other Islanders to flee. Forced proximity and shared danger had made Niran trust them, but it hadn't made his personality any less prickly.

Niran came out of the cabin, a figure as short as the Arbora, but slim and with golden skin and eyes. His long straight white hair was tied back with a patterned scarf and starting to look dingy. It was hard to bathe on the boat, especially for those who couldn't just fly down for a swim in a pond. He was dressed in a heavy robe, borrowed from one of the Arbora, and clutched a pottery mug. "What is it now?" he demanded again.

"There's a storm coming," Jade told him, and pointed.

Niran squinted in that direction. Groundling eyes weren't as keen as Raksuran and he probably couldn't see the cloud formation. "Oh for the love of the Ancestors, that's all we need," he muttered, turned, and stamped back inside the cabin.

"The boats can't outrun it, I suppose," Jade said, still frowning.

"I doubt it," Moon told her. The power to keep the ships aloft and moving came from the tiny fragment of sky-island, kept in the ship's steering apparatus, that let them ride the lines of force that stretched across the Three Worlds. Their progress was steady, but not very fast, and a storm-wind would tear the sails apart. Moon sat up all the way and nudged Chime over. "I think we'll have to stop and winch them down to the ground."

Chime twitched awake and sat up, blinking. "Winch what to the — Oh." He stared uneasily at the approaching clouds. "That's not good. What do we do?"

"Don't panic," Jade said. The others were blearily awake now, looking into the wind. She prodded Song with her foot. "Song, go and find Pearl."

Song nodded and pushed to her feet. She shifted and jumped off the cabin roof, to land on the railing and leap again, taking flight toward the *Indala*. Pearl was the reigning queen, and Jade's mother, and while the situation between them was better than it had been, there were still ripples of tension. Since Moon had caused one big wave of tension by becoming Jade's consort and not Pearl's, it was a relief that Pearl had decided to spend much of her time on the other

ship.

“I wasn’t panicking,” Chime said with dignity. He drew his legs up, wrapped his arms around his knees. “I just never liked storms, even in the colony. Do you know what happens if lightning hits you?”

Jade didn’t bother to answer that. Most of the Raksura, especially the Arbora, would be used to weathering storms safe inside a colony, not in the air on a fragile flying boat. Moon wasn’t happy about it either. Thunderstorms made him edgy. The day after his family had been killed, he had been caught in one, huddled high in the branches of a too-small tree. The Tath had still been hunting him so he couldn’t chance climbing any lower, and the storm had grown in intensity all day, as if it meant to tear the whole forest apart.

At least he wasn’t going to have to face this one alone.

Niran came out of the cabin again, dressed now in the clothes Islanders usually wore on their boats: white pants cropped at the knee and a loose shirt belted at the waist. He held a copper spyglass up to one eye, twisting the lenses to focus on the storm. He said, “We need to find a place to shelter, and we’ll have to lower both ships to the ground and tie them off— Wait, what’s that?”

A dark shape flew toward them out of the gray clouds. Moon squinted to identify it. “That’s Stone.”

Stone was the line-grandfather, the only other adult consort in the Indigo Cloud Court, the oldest person Moon had ever met, as far as he knew. Queens and consorts grew larger and stronger as they grew older, so Stone’s shifted form was nearly four times Moon’s size.

Consorts were already the fastest flyers among Raksura, so fast only queens could keep up with them. Stone’s approach was at nearly full speed, and he reached the ship in only a few moments. He cupped his wings to slow down at almost the last instant, then dropped down onto the stern deck. The ship dipped under his weight and Niran grabbed the railing to steady himself, cursing in the Islander language.

Stone shifted to his groundling form, and the boat righted. He caught hold of the edge of the cabin roof and slung himself up onto it, as the last two warriors scrambled away and jumped down to make room for him. He sat down on the planks, a tall lean man, his face lined and weathered, dressed in a gray shirt and pants. Everything about him had faded to gray, his hair, his skin, something that happened to the groundling forms of the oldest Raksura. The only spot of color was in his blue eyes, though the right one was dimmed and clouded. He jerked his chin toward the streaked sky. “You noticed?”

“Yes.” Jade settled her spines, which had bristled involuntarily at Stone’s rapid approach. “Niran says we’ll need to stop and lower both boats to the ground.”

“If we can find the ground,” Chime put in. “The forest has been getting deeper and there aren’t that many breaks in the canopy.”

“If we don’t lower the ships, the high winds will surely tear them apart,” Niran added, apparently braced for an argument.

Stone conceded that with a nod, but said, “We’re nearly to the new colony. We should make it before the storm reaches us.”

Startled, Chime said, “What? Really?”

Jade gave Stone a hard stare. “Are you certain?”

Stone shrugged. “Sure.”

Annoyed, Jade tapped her claws on the roof. “Were you going to share this information with anyone else?”

“Eventually.” Stone looked toward the bow and the endless sweep of the forest, as if gauging the distance. “I wasn’t sure until today. We’ve been making better time than I thought we would.”

Jade looked down at Niran. “Well?”

Niran set his jaw, but after a moment he said, “Very well. If you want to risk it.” Then he added grudgingly, “Chime is right. The forest beneath us seems too thick for a good landing spot. We’d have to search for a clearing anyway.”

Jade disentangled herself from Moon and pushed to her feet. She shook her frills out and shifted to her winged form. Moon rolled onto his back, just admiring her. She smiled down at him. “I’d better let Pearl know we’re nearly there, too.”

Jade leapt straight up, snapped her wings out to catch the air, then glided over to the *Indala*.

“I’ll find Flower,” Chime said, and threw a nervous look back at the distant clouds. He shifted to jump down to the deck.

Moon stretched out, taking advantage of having the roof nearly to himself, basking in the sun before the clouds covered it. Stone still sat on the edge, looking out over the mist-wreathed forest, his expression preoccupied. “So what’s this place like?” Moon asked him. “A tree.”

Moon swore under his breath. He had gotten that much from everybody else. They were all very enthusiastic about it, but nobody had been able to say how much work they were going to have to do to make it habitable. “Fine, don’t tell me.”

Stone snorted. "I just told you. A tree."

Moon rolled onto his stomach, pillowed his head on his arms, and pretended to go to sleep, one of the only effective ways of dealing with Stone when he was in such a mood. He had been hoping for something not much different from the ruin where the court had lived before, except more defensible. He had lived in trees, and they weren't comfortable. And he had seen how fast the Arbora could build temporary shelters, but they would have no time to do that before the rain hit.

He heard the wood creak as Stone moved around and stretched out on the other half of the roof. Then Stone said, "It's a mountain-tree, the place our court originally came from."

Moon opened his eyes a slit to see Stone lying on his back with one arm flung over his eyes. *A mountain-tree*. Moon turned the words over, searching for familiarity, hoping it stirred his memory. For all he knew, he had lived in one as a child, but he didn't remember it. "I don't know what that is."

Stone's voice was dry. "You will before nightfall."



Moon was standing on the deck when Flower told Jade and Pearl, "I don't need to augur to know we need to get to shelter." She waved a hand toward the approaching storm. She was small even for an Arbora, her white-blond hair wild as usual, and after the long journey her loose red smock was even more ragged. She was the oldest Arbora in the court, and age had leached the color from her skin so she looked far more delicate than she actually was. She was also the chief of the mentor caste, the Arbora who were shamen, augurs, and healers. "We'll have to go below the tree canopy anyway, so Stone's right: we might as well try to reach the new colony."

Pearl's tail lashed, though whether she was angry at the storm or angry at Flower, or just angry in general, it was hard to tell. Her scales were brilliant gold, the webbed pattern overlaying them a deep blue. The frilled mane behind her head was bigger than Jade's, and there were more frills on the tips of her folded wings and on the end of her tail. A head taller than any of the Aeriats, she wore only jewelry, a broad necklace with gold chains and polished blue stones. She said, "I could have gotten that advice from a fledgling."

Jade's spines twitched with the effort to keep silent, but she had been trying hard to get along with Pearl. Moon hoped she could last until they reached the colony. Flower, who was better at dealing with Pearl, said dryly, "Then next time, ask a fledgling."

That had been in the late afternoon, and it was the edge of twilight now. Thunder rumbled continuously, the sky dark gray with clouds and the cool wind heavily scented with rain. The Arbora and Aeriats crowded around on the deck, waiting with nervous impatience, most of them in groundling form to conserve their strength. Moon, by virtue of being a consort, had a place along the railing. He stood next to Chime and Knell, who was leader of the Arbora caste of soldiers.

Knell scratched his shoulder through his shirt, grimacing. He had been wounded in the Fell attack on the colony, the attack that had killed many of the other soldiers, and had new claw scars all down his chest. He said, "I hope Blossom knows what she's doing."

Blossom was the teacher who steered the *Indala*, on Niran's instructions. Chime stirred uneasily, but said, "She's done fine so far."

"She hasn't had to do anything so far." Knell threw him a sour look. "Except go forward and stop."

Knell was Chime's clutchmate, along with Bell, the new leader of the teacher caste. Neither looked much like Chime, Knell and Bell both having dark hair in their groundling forms and being more brown than bronze, though they were both tall for Arbora. It wasn't unusual for Arbora clutches to produce one or two Aeriats warriors, something that the mentors attributed to generations of Arbora breeding with queens and consorts. It was unusual that Chime had been born an Arbora mentor, not an Aeriats warrior. Sometime a turn or so ago, long before Moon had come to the court, Chime had shifted and turned into a warrior. Flower and the other mentors believed it was because of the pressure on the colony from disease and warfare, and the lack of warrior births. Unlike Arbora, warriors were infertile, and could also travel longer distances to find food. Chime had been horrified by the change, and from what Moon could tell, still wasn't that reconciled to it.

"All right," Chime said to Knell, annoyed. "Both boats will crash and we'll all die. Are you happy now?"

"We'd better do it soon then, before the storm kills us," Knell told him.

Suddenly I see the resemblance, Moon thought, carefully not smiling.

Knell was right about the storm, though. Moon could already feel the presence of lightning somewhere nearby, as a tingle on his skin. From the forest below, Stone flew up through a gap in the canopy, his wings knocking aside branches and leaves. He shot up past them, circled back, then dove back down through the gap.

From the bow, Jade shouted back to Niran. “We need to follow him down!”

Niran, standing in front of the steering cabin, looked horrified. Thunder rumbled again, reminding everyone that they didn’t have a choice. The *Valendera* went first. It carefully maneuvered down through the narrow gap in the canopy, while Arbora hung off the sides to give directions to Niran. The ship sank past layers of branches that scraped at the hull and the railings, and scattered leaves and twigs across the deck.

Finally they moved down into green shadows, as the wind died away to a cool, damp, sweet-scented breeze. The lower branches of the trees grew lush flowers in blues and purples that wound down the dark gray trunks.

There was far more room under the canopy than Moon had expected, a vast green space. The flying boats could sail around down here easily.

Niran eased the *Valendera* forward, gliding between the trunks, leaving room for the *Indala* to follow it down.

Moon leaned over the railing and tried to see the ground, but it was hundreds of paces down, lost in the shadows. Not far below the ship he could see platforms covered with greenery standing out from the trees and completely encircling the trunks, connecting the trees to each other in a web, many more than large enough for the *Valendera* to set down on.

They looked like tethered chunks of sky-island, covered with grass and flowers, dripping with vines, most supporting glades of smaller trees. But as the ship drifted closer to one, he saw the platforms were thick branches that had grown together and intertwined in broad swathes, catching windblown dirt and seeds until they built up into solid ground.

Everyone was quiet, just taking it in. “These are mountain-trees,” Chime said softly, as he leaned out over the rail. “The platforms are the suspended forest. I read about this a long time ago, but I never thought I’d see it.”

Once the *Indala* had safely lowered down to join them, Niran came out of the cabin to look up at the tree canopy critically. “We should be safe enough if we can tie off somewhere down here.”

Knell nodded, looking up. “We’re going to get wet, though.” High overhead, the heavy wind bent the treetops and rushed through the leaves as rain fell in fitful gusts.

Stone caused a mild sensation by climbing down through the upper branches and dropping down onto the deck. Arbora and Aeriati scrambled out of his way, and the ship rocked under his weight before he shifted back to groundling. The rainwater that had already collected on his scales splashed down onto the boards to form a pool around him, and his hair and clothes were soaked. Not seeming to notice, he pointed off between the giant trees. "That way."

Niran turned to him, frowning. "Is it far? If the wind rises too much, we could still be driven into a tree."

"It's not far, and it's better shelter than this," Stone told him. "If you think it's getting too dangerous, we can stop."

Niran looked up at the treetops again to gauge the strength of the wind. He didn't look entirely happy, but he nodded. "Very well."

Stone headed toward the bow, where Jade and Pearl waited. Niran threw a thoughtful look at Moon. "It surprises me that he listens to my objections."

Stone was used to taking advice from the Arbora, and he had traveled further and dealt with more different peoples than anyone else in the court, even Moon. It had been Stone's idea to go to the Yellow Sea to trade with the Islanders for the use of their boats. But Moon only said, "He likes groundlings."

With a skeptical shake of his head, Niran went back to the steering cabin.

As the *Valendera* began to move again, Moon left the railing and followed Stone toward the bow, making his way through the Arbora and Aeriati. They crowded along the railings, clung to the mast, perched on every available space that gave a view. The fear of being caught in the storm had given way to excitement and anticipation, and uneasiness, since not everyone was as sure of their situation as Stone. Moon couldn't imagine the confidence it took to bring these people all this way, to live in a new place that only you had seen. Not that they had anywhere to go back to if they didn't like it, but still.

Jade stood against the railing in the bow with Flower. Pearl was there with River, Drift, Vine, Floret, and some other warriors. River flicked a resentful look at Moon, but even he was too preoccupied to provoke a fight.

Moon stepped up to the railing next to Jade, and she absently put an arm around his waist. He leaned against her, trying not to feel selfconscious in front of Pearl.

It grew darker, the green-tinted sunlight muted as clouds closed

in high above the treetops. The drizzle turned into a light rain that pattered on the deck. The platforms of the suspended forest grew wider and more extensive. Many of them overlapped, or were connected by broad branches, with ponds or streams. Waterfalls fell from holes in some of the mountain-sized trees. Moon wondered if the water was drawn up from the forest floor through the roots. It was like a whole multi-layered second forest hanging between the tree canopy and the ground, somewhere far below.

Then the trunks of the mountain-trees fell away, though the canopy overhead seemed even thicker. Moon realized they were sailing toward a shadowy shape directly ahead, a single great tree.

Jade looked back at Stone. There was tension in her voice as she asked, "Is that it?"

He nodded. There were nervous murmurs from the others, a shiver of movement that reverberated back through the crowded deck.

The multiple layers of branches reached up like giants' arms, and the trunk was enormous, wider around than the base of the ruined step pyramid that had formed the old Indigo Cloud colony. From the lower part of the trunk, greenery platforms extended out, multiple levels of them, some more than five hundred paces across. A waterfall fell out of a knothole nearly big enough to sail the *Valendera* through, plunged down to collect in a pool on one of the platforms, then fell to the next, and the next, until it disappeared into the shadows below.

The platforms held only flowers, mossy grass, and stands of smaller trees, but many showed signs of once being worked into beds for crops, with the remnants of raised areas for planting and dry ponds and channels that must have been for irrigation.

Everyone was silent. Then Pearl twitched and settled her spines. She said, "Stone, lead us in."

The warriors moved back, and Stone took two long steps forward, caught hold of the railing, and vaulted it. He shifted in midair, his big form momentarily blotting out the view of the tree as he snapped his wings out.

Pearl hissed a command and went over the railing. The warriors followed, and Vine paused to pick up Flower. Moon leapt after Jade.

They flew through the light rain, and Stone led the way toward the huge knothole, which was more than big enough for him to comfortably land in. He moved further in, around the edge of the pool, and shifted to groundling. Moon landed beside him, folded his wings, and turned to look around. Jade and the others landed, and

Vine set Flower on her feet. Chime and a few other Aeriats caught up with them a moment later.

In the cavernous space, folds of the trunk formed multiple nooks and chambers, extending back into the interior until the green-gray light failed. The pool, partly choked with weeds and moss, wound back away into the depths. The water fell over the edge of the opening, the sound as it struck the pond below so faint it was lost in the rain. Lush green vines wound over the walls, but Moon could see carvings in the smooth wood: serpentine shapes, claws, a pointed wingtip, like the images on the metal vessels and jewelry the Arbora made.

Stone walked beside the pool toward the back of the chamber. No one seemed to want to break the silence. Moon glanced back and saw River touch Pearl's arm, pointing to something on the floor. He looked down and saw small squares set into the wood, something with a faint shine like mother of pearl, white shading to green and pink, glittering in the dim light. They were set all along the rim of the pool, scattered over the floor.

There was a doorway ahead, round and ringed with carvings. Stone stepped through, Jade and Pearl followed him, and the others trailed after.

Moon paused to taste the air, but there was nothing but the muskysweet scent of the tree itself, and the earthy smells of dirt and dead leaves and water. Whether he liked it or not, this would be their permanent home, he reminded himself. He took a deep breath, told himself to stop worrying, and followed the others.

Light shone ahead in the entry passage, and he found a disk set into the wall, a curving, graceful shell-shape, like something that would wash up on a beach. It glowed now with the soft, heatless light of magic. Flower must be renewing the spells on them as she went by. It was enough to show that the passage narrowed to only a few paces across and wound through several switchbacks, probably for defense. Major kethel, the largest breed of Fell, couldn't get through here at all without shifting to groundling form. Even minor dakti, the smallest Fell, would have to come through a few at a time; an attempt to swarm would probably leave them jammed up in one of these tight turns, and the whole passage could be easily blocked or defended from the inside. And if there were multiple exits, hidden in the folds of the trunk, it would be near impossible to trap the inhabitants inside. *And that canopy, nothing could dive through that without knowing where the openings are.*

Right at the point where Moon was wondering if the whole place

was a maze, the passage widened out again and he heard water falling.

He stepped out into another cavernous chamber. Two glowing shells were already lit and Flower was just touching a third, its light blooming to catch reflections off walls so smooth they seemed lacquered. Two open stairways spiraled up the far wall, with slim pillars widely spaced along the steps. They criss-crossed and led up to balconies, higher levels with round doorways. Directly across from the entrance, just below the first cross of the stairways, there was an opening with water falling out of it, streaming down the wall to a pool in the floor. There wasn't any open channel leading away, but this could be the source for the water flow in the outer knothole.

The others moved around, staring, exclaiming softly. Stone said, "This is the opening hall, for gathering, for greeting."

Jade turned to take it in. "The court must have been huge."

Chime went to the nearest stair and ran his hand down one slim pillar, marveling at it. "Did they carve it all out?"

"No." Stone stood in the center, his face tilted up to the central well. "The Arbora made it grow like this."

Everyone looked around again, as if trying to picture it. Flower shook her head, regretful, awed. "There's much we've forgotten."

Moon moved to Stone's side and looked up. The well wound up through the tree in a big spiral to vanish into darkness. It was like the central well of the step pyramid that had held the last colony, only much larger and far more impressive. He wondered if the slight resemblance was why the Raksura had chosen the ruin.

Stone nodded toward a stair spiraling down the wall. "That leads down to the nurseries and the teachers' bowers. We should be able to fit most of the court in there, at least for tonight."

"One section of bowers big enough to fit all of us?" Chime muttered. "I don't know whether it means our court is too small or this one was too big."

"A little of both, maybe," Floret said, looking up at the well.

"This was our court." Stone's voice was quiet, but everyone went suddenly still. "You're all descended from the Raksura who lived here."

Except me, Moon thought. He had found Indigo Cloud intimidating enough when it had been installed at the small colony. Trying to imagine this place populated with hundreds of Raksura

made his nerves twitch.

Thunder rumbled outside, and Moon flinched, then settled his spines to hide it.

“We need to get the others in, and tie off the boats,” Jade said to Pearl.

Pearl flicked her spines in acknowledgement, but for once she seemed more excited than annoyed. She turned to the warriors. “Go back and tell Knell and Bone to choose a group of soldiers and hunters as guards and scouts, and have the rest of the Aeriats fly them over. We need to make certain there’s nothing dangerous before we bring in the clutches and the rest of the Arbora.”

Everyone scrambled to obey.

Chapter Two

Moon helped fly the first group of Arbora, including Bone, Knell, forty or so other hunters and soldiers, and the two young mentors, Heart and Merit, from the boats to the tree's knothole

entrance. With all the warriors joining in, it didn't take long, though the steadily increasing rain drumming on their wings and the deepening gloom under the canopy reminded them that time was limited. The other Arbora still stuck on the boats weren't happy with the delay, but they had to make certain the tree was safe.

Once they were assembled in the greeting hall, Pearl told them, "The Aeriats will search upwards, the Arbora will go down. Move quickly, make certain there's nothing dangerous here. You can stop and gawk at it all later." She jerked her head at Knell. "You stay here with the soldiers and make certain this level is safe."

Flower turned to Merit and Heart, both bouncing with barely restrained excitement. "One of you go with Chime, and light the lamps for the Aeriats. The other stay here with Knell and light the rest of this hall and the passages around it."

"I've never done shells before." Merit looked anxious. "Just moss and wood."

"You'll learn as you go," Chime said firmly, and caught Merit around the waist. He sprang up after the warriors who were already climbing the central well.

Moon hissed to himself in frustration, torn between wanting to join the warriors who were heading upward, and wanting to be a good consort. Stone had already disappeared and was unavailable to give advice; possibly he was making his own search or getting reacquainted with the place. Not wanting to admit to insecurity, even to himself, Moon followed Jade, Flower, and the Arbora exploring party down the stairway that led below the greeting hall, to the section Stone had said they should make their camp for the night.

They followed the curving stairs down into another large, central chamber with a high domed roof and round doorways leading away. Only a little light from above fell down the stairwell. The room was a

dark pit, even to Raksuran eyes. But the only scent was of must and leaf rot, and the space felt empty. Moon ran his hands over the wall as high as he could reach, feeling for light shells. *Groundlings would have brought a candlelamp or a torch*, he thought, frustrated. The hunters went down the steps, spread out along the wall in the dark, searching, until someone said, "Here's one!"

After a moment, a shell further down the steps started to glow, revealing Flower standing on tip-toes to reach it. Jade and the hunters turned to look around the room.

The light crept up the wall onto carvings of trees that curved up across the ceiling. It was a forest, picked out in detail, with plumes, spirals, fern trees, many others Moon couldn't name. Their branches entwined overhead, and their roots came down to frame the round doorways that led off to different rooms, as if you were standing in an enclosed and protected glade. The hunters murmured in appreciation, and Bone said in a hushed voice, "If every part of this place is as beautiful..."

Flower nodded, amusement and awe mingled in her expression. "If this is just the teachers' gathering hall, I can't wait to see the queens' level."

"We'll see it later." Jade stepped over the edge of the stairs to drop down to the floor. "We need to find all the approaches to this section, make certain we can guard it tonight." She turned to Bone. "And there have to be more passages outside, and a better place to land the boats and unload them."

"We'll find it," he told her. He turned for the nearest doorway and made an abrupt gesture. The other hunters scattered, and Flower hurried after them to light the shells. Moon and Jade followed more slowly, lingering to look. The other doorways led into an interconnected, multileveled maze of rooms, smaller stairways winding up, with balconies extending out over the wells. Without the sound of moving water it was too silent, haunted, much of it lost in darkness. Moon tried to shake off his uneasiness as he followed Jade through the empty place.

In one of the first rooms, they found something hanging from the ceiling, a big wooden thing like half a nutshell, only it was nearly ten paces across. It swayed gently when Jade pushed at it. "It's a bed," she said, sounding startled. "Stone's right—I think they grew this. Or made the tree grow it."

Moon felt the thick rope supporting one end of the bed, and realized it wasn't rope but a heavy vine. It joined the wood

seamlessly, with no knots. The basket beds made for the old colony were obviously an attempt to duplicate this.

As they wandered through the level, they found more beds hanging from the ceiling or extending out from the walls. There were also shallow metal basins set into the smooth wood floors. Flower scratched experimentally at one, and said they were probably for the stones that mentors spelled to give off heat. She added, "I hope it means they had a forge, somewhere lower down."

"Did they bring the anvils?" Moon asked, remembering there had been some concern about that at the old colony.

"I left with Stone before they settled all that," she told him, looking around distractedly. "Niran thought they would plummet right through the ship's hull, and he may have been right."

Moon kept finding bits of debris, things left behind that hinted at the life once lived here. A spill of beads in the dust, each carved like a tiny flower; a curved wooden comb, some of the tines missing; a scrap of faded fabric caught on a carving; a white-glazed bowl, set aside and forgotten on a ledge.

Finally one of the hunters called Jade to come and look at another entrance on a lower level. It was a large round doorway closed by a heavy wooden panel that slid into place and sealed with bolts. After some tugging and pushing, they had got the panel open, and found the doorway sat just above a big branch nearly forty paces across, that lay nearly atop one of the old garden platforms. The Arbora thought it would be a good spot to secure the two boats, and would make it easier to unload them. Moon followed them out the doorway into the rain and picked his way across the big muddy expanse. It felt like solid ground, barely trembling in the wind, and was covered with rambling root vines, probably all that was left of the crop that had once been planted here. He watched as, with careful maneuvering and a lot of shouted instructions, Niran and Blossom brought the two ships close in to the massive trunk. Arbora scrambled under Niran's direction to cast ropes over the huge branch at both ships' bow and stern.

As the Arbora finished fastening the ships into place, Pearl and some of the Aeriats flew out of the knothole entrance above them and spiraled down to land nearby. To Jade, Pearl said, "The upper levels are empty." Chime came over to Moon, squelching in the mud, his tail twitching with excitement. "It's the best colony we could ever have," he said. "There's so much room!"

Bone came out to report that he and Flower and the other hunters

had ventured nearly down to the roots, to the bottom of the habitable areas, and found no sign of anything big enough to threaten them. "There's a lot of dirt and beetles, and tiny treelings that eat beetles, but that's all," Bone finished, the rain dripping off his spines. "The roots and the ground may be a different story, but the doors down there are sealed, and we didn't want to chance opening them without more help." Lightning cracked somewhere overhead, and everyone ducked and winced. Jade said, "Even if there's a Ghobin colony down there, we still need shelter now."

Pearl didn't look at her, but she told Bone, "Call back the searchers and tell them to start unloading the boats. Have everyone keep to the teachers' level for tonight. We'll worry about the rest of the place tomorrow." Everyone scattered to obey. The Arbora started to climb off the boats, all carrying loads of baskets and bags. Tired of feeling useless, Moon jumped up to the *Valendera's* railing to help. Rill, a teacher who was organizing the activity on the deck, called to the cluster of Arbora around her, "Take these first! We're bringing in the food stores and the bedding now, we'll worry about the rest later!"

Moon took the basket someone handed him, and flew it back to the doorway. He landed to carry it into the foyer, and was directed up the passage to a larger chamber where they were putting everything until they could decide what to do with it. He thought it was too small for even the goods stored on the two ships' decks, but he knew how quick the Arbora could be to arrange and organize, so he decided to keep his mouth shut and let them handle it.

As he came back down the passage, a group of teachers carefully carried in the clutches and fledglings. Moon passed Bell carrying the Sky Copper clutch. The little queen Frost was in one arm and Thorn, the consort, was in the other. The smaller consort Bitter was wrapped tightly around Bell's neck, and from Bell's expression it wasn't comfortable. As they passed, Frost informed Moon, "This place is dark and wet and it smells funny!"

It was hard to argue with that. Moon said, "It'll be fine." *Just keep telling yourself that*, he thought.

But in the rush to unload the *Valendera* and *Indala*, Moon forgot his misgivings. Once the rest of the Aeriats returned, it was easier for them to move things from the decks down onto the platform, where the Arbora could then carry them into the tree. The wind was rising, but the two ships had been as well fastened to the giant branch as they could manage, their sails tightly folded. They vibrated, but did not show any sign of movement that might cause damage.

As Moon lifted a cask off the deck, a warrior with gold scales

passed him, carrying a basket. He glanced up in time to see her face. "Balm?"

She was Jade's clutchmate. She had been staying on the *Indala* and while Moon had asked after her, he hadn't managed to see her during the trip. Startled, she hesitated, as if about to speak. But the wind gusted and knocked a smaller warrior off the railing right toward Moon. He dropped the cask in time to catch the warrior, but when he set him back on his feet, Balm had already moved away. Moon collected the cask, giving up for the moment. It wasn't as if he knew what he was going to say to her, anyway.

They had gotten everything off the open decks of both ships, and moved part of the contents of the *Valendera's* hold, when the rain suddenly increased from an annoyance to a drenching torrent. The wind was still rising, hard enough to stir the branches of the lesser trees, and it was getting darker as night drew in.

A gust knocked another Aeriatic off the railing and the smaller Arbora were getting stuck in the mud. Moon thought it was time to halt for the night. The last thing they needed was for an Arbora to get swept off the platform or an Aeriatic to be slammed into the trunk. He caught Song, and told her to pass the word to the others to go inside. Then he shooed a last few Arbora off the *Indala* and braved the wind to fly over to the *Valendera's* deck.

Arbora ran around helping Niran close and fasten down the hatches so the ship wouldn't fill with water. Moon found Bead pulling down the last of the waterproofed awnings and helped her bundle it up. "We need to get inside. It's too rough out here," he told her.

She nodded distractedly, water streaming off her head frills. She trembled with exhaustion. "We've got everything off the decks, all the food stores. I think everything else can stay for now."

"Good." Moon saw Floret and Root perched on the branch, and waved them down. As they dropped down onto the deck, he handed the bundled awning to Root and handed Bead to Floret, telling them, "Make sure she gets inside. Tell the others we're done for tonight."

Floret scooped up Bead and leapt back to the branch. Root said, "You know, consorts aren't supposed to do things like this, not unless they're line-grandfathers like Stone."

Moon, about to turn away, paused and stared down at him.

Root stepped back, saying defensively, "That's what I always heard."

Moon lifted his spines. "Get in the tree."

Root got.

Moon stalked across the deck, caught a last few Arbora and Aeriats and sent them after the others. The problem was that Root might well be right. But for most of Moon's life, traveling from groundling cities to settlements to camps, joining in for community work was one of the best ways to be accepted. For smaller settlements, it was sometimes required for travelers who wanted to stay for even a few days. And he found it hard to believe that a real consort raised in a court would just stand around and do nothing while everyone else worked frantically. *You could ask Stone or Jade or Flower*, he told himself. *But they might answer you.* And it might be the wrong answer. He had no idea what he would do if Jade told him to just sit to one side and watch. *Besides die of boredom and frustration.* No, it was better to keep pretending he just didn't know any better, at least for now. Hopefully he could keep it up for a long time.

Moon found Blossom and Niran in the bow, arguing. Or at least he thought they were arguing; the rain was so heavy now they might just be shouting to hear each other. He got their attention by lifting and spreading his wings, shielding them from the downpour. Blossom turned to him and waved a hand in exasperation. "Niran thinks he should stay out here tonight!"

Moon should have seen that one coming. Stubbornness in the face of implacable odds was Niran's specialty, and he was determined to bring both ships home intact to his family, whether it killed him or not. Moon would rather get Niran home intact to his family. He said, "Niran, we don't know this place at all. Something could climb up here, crack this boat like a nut, and eat you."

His clothes dripping and his white hair plastered to his scalp, Niran shook his head. "I've spent many nights in strange places aboard these ships..."

"Yes, with your people. Not alone." Moon had seen how the Islanders had reacted when the Fell had threatened them. They had been more than willing to abandon the ships to save the crews. "You're telling me your grandfather and sister would think this was a good idea?"

Niran just set his jaw and didn't try to answer that. "If the wind grows worse..."

"You won't be able to do anything," Blossom insisted. "If something happens to the ships, we can always give you their value, or fix them. We can probably fix them."

Moon considered just grabbing both of them and dragging them

inside, but Niran seemed to be swayed by Blossom's argument. Water streaming down his face, he grudgingly assented, "Very well."

Niran and Blossom still wanted to check over both ships, but finally they admitted both were as secure as possible. Moon picked Niran up and jumped down from the railing to land on the grassy platform, now awash in mud. He set Niran down as Blossom swung down the side of the ship after them and landed with a splash.

They squelched through the mud, Niran staggering in the wind, and made their way toward the circle of light that marked the doorway. Blossom scrambled through, and Moon gave Niran a boost, then climbed in after him.

Niran sat down on the floor with a gasp of relief, and Moon resisted the urge to shake the water out of his spines. The foyer was still crowded with wet, muddy Raksura; no one had shifted to groundling, since that would just transfer the mud to their clothing. Others were carrying the last of the baskets and bundles away down the passage.

"That's everyone!" Bone called out. He and two other hunters put their shoulders to the heavy door, sliding it closed and shutting out the rain and wind.

Blossom took Niran's arm and helped him up. "Come on, let's find Bead and Spice. They were supposed to make up a bower for us."

"A what?" Niran said, wringing his shirt out as he followed her.

Someone handed Moon one of the pieces of scrap cloth being passed around, and he used it to scrape the mud off his feet and claws. As he finished, he glanced up in time to see Balm slip unobtrusively down a passage. He tossed the cloth back onto the pile and followed her.

He caught up with her just past the foyer, where the passage divided into three directions, all heading up into different parts of the teacher's level. "Balm, where are you going?"

She stopped, her spines twitching uneasily. "To find somewhere to sleep." Three young warriors slid past, carefully not looking at her, and Balm hissed. "I'm tired of feeling like I did something wrong."

Balm hadn't done anything wrong, except be unlucky enough to be used by the Fell to spy on the colony. Fell could influence groundlings, cause them to believe anything the Fell told them, and to do things they would never do in their right minds. They could use this power to a lesser extent on Raksura, but it didn't work as well. The Fell had been able to make Balm tell them about the court's plans,

but she had had no memory of it, no awareness of what she was doing. Moon had seen enough groundlings in this same state to know it wasn't her fault. But it had put Balm at a severe disadvantage in the maneuvering for dominance between Pearl's faction of warriors and Jade's. He said, "Then stop acting like it. Don't let them treat you like this." Jade's influence could only protect Balm so far. River and his cronies couldn't attack Balm outright; now that Pearl was taking more interest in the court, the last thing River wanted was to make her angry enough to intervene. But they could make Balm's life a misery, and know that they were hurting Jade by proxy. And Balm just didn't deserve it. "You belong with Jade."

Balm hesitated, obviously torn. But she said, "I'll... think about it," and turned away.

Moon hesitated, half-tempted to follow, but he didn't know what else to say to persuade her. He turned to the passage to the teachers' hall.

As he walked through the bowers this time, they were anything but haunted and silent. Flower and the other mentors had been renewing the spells on every light-shell they could find. The warm light caught red and yellow highlights in the wood, chased the shadows away, threw the wall carvings into high relief. Arbora and Aeriad were everywhere, cleaning dirt and debris out of the bower beds, hanging wet clothes off the stairwell balconies, pulling bedding out of baskets. Their voices echoed through the rooms. They were excited to finally be here, relieved to be free of the cramped quarters on the boats.

Moon wanted to check on Bitter, Frost, and Thorn, and see the other clutches, so he followed the sound of squeaking and chattering. He had been the one to find the three Sky Copper fledglings in the Dwei hive, where the Fell had been keeping them as part of their plan to make more Raksuran crossbreeds. He wasn't sure if the clutch had gotten so attached to him because of the rescue or because he was the first Raksura they had seen after their colony had been destroyed. Whatever the reason, Frost persisted in telling everyone that they were Moon's clutch now.

There had been no question that Indigo Cloud would adopt them; at the moment the court had no other royal fledglings. If Moon and Jade didn't produce any fledgling queens of their own, Frost could end up as reigning queen of the court. Moon knew that wasn't anyone's preference, but it was a relief to have the option available. And it would be twenty or thirty turns at least before Frost would be old enough to even be considered a sister queen, which gave him and

Jade plenty of time to have their own clutches.

He found a round doorway with the lintel carved with baby Arbora and Aeriati tumbling in play, and stepped through into a big, low-ceilinged chamber.

At the moment, it was a chaotic mess, with Arbora children and a few warrior fledglings, all overexcited and shifting at random, as the teachers tried to calm them and put them to bed in nests of blankets and cushions. It was even more obvious here that there had been far more Arbora births than Aeriati. Hopefully things would even out, now that the court was in this new colony and free of the Fell influence that had haunted it for so many turns.

Circling the chamber as he looked for the Sky Copper royals, Moon passed a maze of smaller rooms opening off the main area, and several shallow fountain pools, now dry. The place had been meant to house far more children than Indigo Cloud could boast.

“Moon,” Bark called, a little desperately. Her arms were full with a crying Arbora toddler. She nodded down toward her feet, where Bitter, in Raksuran form, tried to hold onto Bark and two very young and squirming Arbora. “Could you—”

Moon crouched down, untangled Bitter’s claws from Bark’s skirt and coaxed him to let go of the toddlers. “Bitter, if you want to hold them, you have to shift otherwise you could scratch them.” From what Moon had seen, Arbora at that age shifted randomly back and forth, but their claws and spines were still soft; Bitter’s had already hardened, and he was still learning how to handle them.

Bitter looked up at him with big eyes, then reluctantly shifted. As a groundling he was a thin little boy, with dark bronze skin and a thatch of dark hair, dressed in a shirt that was too big for him.

Moon sat Bitter down on the nearest cushion, put one of the Arbora in his lap and the other next to him. Now that they weren’t being accidentally prodded by Bitter’s claws, they settled comfortably against him and shifted back to groundling.

“Thank you,” Bark said in relief. The baby she held settled down too, and sniffled and hooked claws into her shoulder. Bark nodded toward a bundle of blankets nearby. Frost and Thorn were curled up asleep there, Frost in her wingless form and Thorn as a groundling. He clutched her tail in one hand. “Those two went right to sleep, but Bitter’s been upset about the storm. Haven’t you, sweet baby?”

Bitter looked up at her and nodded solemnly, keeping a firm grip on the Arbora. Moon suspected it wasn’t the storm. Any upheaval had

to be frightening for him. Bitter, Frost, and Thorn had seen their entire court killed, the queens and consorts, the other children in the nurseries, the Arbora who had taken care of them, everyone they had ever known.

Something similar had happened to Moon. He just didn't remember it. He told Bitter, "I won't be far away. Jade and I are just out there in the central hall. All right?"

Bitter nodded solemnly again, and allowed himself to be tucked into a nest with the Arbora babies.

Moon left the nurseries. Bitter obviously remembered what had happened to his court, all too clearly. Moon's earliest memory was of living in the forest with Sorrow and the others, so he must have been even younger than Bitter when his court had been destroyed.

Just down the passage, he found Chime, Flower, and Rill in the teachers' hall, all in groundling form, unpacking baskets and laying out bedding. Root and Song were already there, vigorously drying off their scales. With the glowing shells casting light on the carved forest, surrounded by the noise and scents of the rest of the court, the hall was much more welcoming.

Moon's scales were dry enough now, and he shifted to groundling and stretched, trying to ease his sore shoulder. Chime looked up, still flushed with excitement, and told him, "Jade's staying in here tonight, and Pearl is near the stairs on the level below with some more warriors. That way if anything tries to get in, it'll run into one of us first. One of them. You know what I mean."

"Good." Even if nothing else had taken up residence in the tree, there was always the chance their presence would attract predators.

Flower carried a basket over to the heating basin and dumped out a load of small, flat river rocks. She sat beside the basin and held out her hands. After a moment, heat started to rise. She sat back with a sigh and tucked her skirts under her feet. "That's better."

Rill nodded, pulling out more blankets to hand to Song and Root. "It'll get the damp out of the air." She glanced around and pointed to one of the baskets. "Moon, those are some things from Jade's bower, and we put yours in there too."

As far as Moon knew, he didn't have any things except the clothes he was wearing. Everything he had owned had been left behind in the Cordans' camp. He went to open the basket.

On top were heavy quilted blankets and bed cushions, in shades of dark blues and sea greens, with patterns picked out in gold. He

lifted those out and set them aside, figuring that was what they would be sleeping on tonight. Next there were a few rolled leather wraps. Peeking inside one, he saw it held jewelry, silver strands wound with polished green stones and deep-water pearls. Jade had used all the jewelry she had been wearing on their trip to the east to pay for supplies and to give to Selis in return for helping them. Apparently there was plenty more where that came from. He was beginning to realize that the Raksura didn't measure wealth in gems or even the sturdy, colorful fabrics the Arbora made. He wasn't sure what they did measure wealth in. "That's a lot of jewelry."

Flower sounded wry. "It's nothing to what Stone's collected over the years."

"I only hope we found it all." Rill, unpacking a copper-chased kettle, made a helpless gesture. "He had it hidden all over the colony. After everything that happened—"

"Don't worry about it, not tonight." Chime took the kettle away from her and set it on the warming stones.

Looking for more bedding, Moon pushed the leather rolls aside. The fur blanket beneath, the long soft hair dyed to the purple haze of twilight, looked familiar. He pulled it out to find it was bundled around a belt with a sheathed knife, the dark soft leather tooled with red in a serpentine pattern, with round buckles of red gold. These were the consort's gifts Jade had left at the bower he had been using in the teachers' hall at the old colony. The knife's hilt was carved horn, the blade was a tooth, sharp as glass but as strong as fine metal. He hadn't accepted them at the time, having no idea what he would be getting into and mostly certain that he hadn't wanted to get into anything. Now... *Now it's different*, he reminded himself. And he still really wanted that knife.

He left it and the belt on top of Jade's jewelry and added the blanket to their nest of bedding. Suddenly self-conscious, he looked around to make sure no one was watching him, especially Stone. Then he realized he hadn't seen him since they arrived. "Where's Stone?"

Flower, carefully unwrapping a cake of pressed tea, said, "He went up to look around the queens' level. That was a while ago," she added, frowning.

Chime dropped a last cushion onto a pile of bedding and glanced up, worried. "You think something's wrong?"

"No, not wrong, just..." Flower hesitated. "This place was his home, a long time ago."

She was right; this had to be strange for Stone. Moon put the lid back on the basket and said, "I'll find him."

He took the stairs up to the greeting hall, where the soldiers had spread their bedding out around a hearth basin near the fountain. Merit was still with them, looking small next to the bigger Arbora. Merit waved, but the soldiers just stared at Moon with wary curiosity.

He shifted and jumped to climb straight up the wall, finding plenty of handholds built into the carving, rough from where generations of Raksura had hooked their claws. He followed the spiral well up and up, climbing past open balconies and galleries.

Somewhere far below, he heard a voice raised in song that echoed up through the passages of the tree. Moon winced. *Please, not tonight.* He hoped they were too weary for a full chorus.

The court had sung once aboard the flying boats, one night when they had been passing over a grass plain. It had been a dirge for the dead members of the court, and for the colony ruined by the Fell. The mingled voices had been so low and deep, so heavy with pain and loss, the deck of the *Valendera* had trembled like a sounding board.

Moon had slipped away from Jade's side, retreating to the deck cabin. The door was partly open, and he ducked his head inside. Light came from glowing moss stuffed into the glass candlelamps, and Niran sat on the bed, which folded out from one of the benches along the wall. He said, "You might as well come in. Everyone else does."

Knowing Niran, Moon took that for the invitation it was. He stepped in and sat cross-legged on the deck. For a normal voyage, Niran would have quarters below deck, but all those rooms were stuffed with supplies and Arbora. The waist-high wooden pillar in the center of the cabin held the fragment of flying island that kept the boat aloft, and let it travel the streams of force that crossed the Three Worlds. There were also a couple of clay water jars, and baskets of supplies, one with a pottery bowl and cup stacked atop it. Niran had a few bundles of paper next to him on the blankets, and a wooden writing tablet in his lap. He said, dryly, "I'm keeping a record of our travels, for my grandfather. He would never forgive me if I didn't."

Moon settled his back against the wall to support his sore shoulder. "It'll help him get over missing this trip."

"Hopefully." Niran nodded toward the door. "You don't participate in the... concert?"

Moon hesitated, debating several different excuses, then settled for, "I don't know how." Not counting the court's stupid rules and

customs, everything else about being Raksuran he had either learned from Sorrow or figured out for himself. The singing was alien, and it made him deeply uneasy. In its own way, it was as disturbing as the queen's connection to every member of her court, the connection that let her keep you from shifting, or draw you in and make you feel like you were sharing a heart. It was too much like the Fell's power to influence and cloud the minds of groundlings. Jade hadn't shown any evidence of that ability yet, but that might be because she wasn't the reigning queen. Moon wasn't looking forward to the time when she did.

Niran lifted his brows and made a note. "I forget sometimes that you have only recently joined them."

Moon had wondered if anybody else would ever forget it. *And you're worse than all of them*, he told himself now. He hadn't even tried to sing, just run off to hide with the only available groundling.

Climbing the wall of the mountain-tree, he pushed the uncomfortable thoughts away. They were all here now, and it was time for new beginnings.

The greeting hall was far below him when the ceiling finally curved up to form a wide circular gallery. He climbed up onto it and found it opened into another hall.

A few wall-shells glowed, enough to chase away some of the shadows. More round doorways led off into other chambers, and there was a dry fountain against the wall, the basin below it empty and stained with moss at the bottom. The carving above it made him hiss in appreciation.

It was a queen, a queen bigger even than Stone's shifted form, her outspread wings stretched across the walls to circle the entire hall, finally meeting tip to tip. Her carved scales glinted faintly in the dim light, and as Moon moved closer he saw they were set with polished sunstones.

High above her head there was another open gallery. The rooms off this level had to be the bowers and halls for the reigning queen and her sisters, and he was guessing that the level directly above was for the consorts.

The gallery was a little high, but Moon crouched and made the leap up, caught the ridged edge, and swung up onto the floor.

The open space was ringed with doorways into a series of interconnected rooms. Moon shifted back to groundling, and wandered through the empty spaces, finding bower beds, heating

basins, and dry fountainpools, easily deep and wide enough for swimming. He found a couple of small stairways that led to the queens' chambers just below, and then another one that seemed to wind down a long way, probably to join the main stairs in the central well. There was an opening to the outside somewhere, because the air moved with the rush of wind, damp and fresh. With the place cleaned and swept, with warming stones and running fountains, furs, and rich fabrics, it would be ridiculously comfortable. Moon couldn't imagine being born into this kind of luxury.

In a room against the outer trunk, he finally found Stone. He stood at a big round opening to the outside, looking out into the rainy gloom. The opening had a heavy wooden sliding door, like the one they had found on the lower entrance. Stone must have opened it, dislodging the dirt and rotting leaves now scattered across the floor.

Moon stepped up beside him. A giant branch blocked the view directly overhead, but the doorway looked down on the platforms far below, now sodden under the pouring rain. In the failing light, he could just make out the old irrigation channels and ponds filling up, making a ghost outline of the gardens that had once been there.

Stone didn't look around. His expression was, as usual, hard to read. He said, "It feels... wrong. It's too quiet."

The rain was a rushing din, but that wasn't the kind of noise he meant. Moon said, "It's not quiet downstairs." He leaned against the wall beside the opening. The air smelled rich with the rain, the dark earth, and loam. "Were you here when they built... grew this place?"

His eyes still on the drowning gardens, Stone's brow furrowed. "I'm not that old."

Thunder rumbled, not quite close enough to make Moon twitch. "But you lived here."

"For a while. I was a boy when Indigo and Cloud led the court away." From his expression, it was hard to tell if it was a good memory or a bad one. "I was too young and stupid to see it as anything but an adventure."

Then these rooms had been filled with light and life, when there had been so many Raksura here they had had to leave for more open territory. It had to be strange to see it like this, dark and empty, scented of nothing but must and stale water. Moon had never gone back to a place he had lived before, unless he counted the Cordans' camp, and he hadn't felt anything there except impatience.

Still lost in memory, Stone added, "No one ever thought I'd get a

queen, but Azure picked me out of the lot.”

Moon frowned at him. “Why didn’t they think you’d get a queen?”

Stone tapped his cheek, below his clouded right eye. He said, dryly, “I wasn’t born perfect.”

Moon had always thought that was a fighting injury, like the rest of Stone’s scars. He knew consorts often went to other courts; Stone had been trying to get one from Star Aster when he had found Moon. But he supposed another court wouldn’t want an imperfect consort either. “What do consorts do, when they can’t get a queen?”

Stone thought about it for a long moment. “It depends on the court. Here... it wouldn’t have been so bad. All the benefits of being a consort, and none of the responsibilities.”

Moon was still working out what he felt about the benefits and responsibilities of being a consort. Before Jade, he would have been more than happy with the less complicated life of a warrior; all he had ever wanted was a place to live. Finding a place to live without having to hide what he was had been a completely unexpected turn of luck. But he could imagine how someone raised with the idea that the point of his life was to be a queen’s mate and to make clutches would see things differently. “That could seem... pointless.”

Stone didn’t look away from the ruined gardens. “It depends what you make of it.”

Thunder crashed, near enough to send a tremble through the wood underfoot, and Moon flinched back from the flash.

Stone glanced at him, lifting a brow. Moon was prepared for some sort of remark, but all Stone did was drop a hand on the back of Moon’s neck and shake him—affectionately, not hard enough to rattle his teeth. “Let’s go.”

Stone shoved the door into place, slid the bolts home, and they made their way down again. They took the long stairways through the silent spaces, since Stone didn’t seem to want to shift. The light-shells had been sporadically lit, giving glimpses of balcony-bowers hanging out over circular wells, dry fountains and pools, and carvings of Aeriat, Arbora, strange plants and animals mixed in with the more familiar. Much of it was inlaid with polished shell or glittering stones, or clear crystal. The singing had died away. Most of the court must have settled into sleep.

When they reached the greeting hall they found Knell sitting at the hearth with the other soldiers. He nodded to Stone. “The hunters

are at the stair just below the teachers' bowers, with Pearl and some warriors. Jade's just below us, outside the nurseries."

Stone looked around the hall thoughtfully. "I'll come back up later and sleep here."

Moon saw the flicker of relief cross Knell's face. This was the only entrance they had found so far that wasn't sealed, and if anything was going to object to their presence, it would probably choose to enter that way. Stone would be a big deterrent.

They took the stairs down to the teachers' hall. Vine, Floret, and Sand had joined the others there, all in groundling form, and settled into a pile of bedding on the other side of the chamber. Root, demonstrating a youthful lack of nerves, was already curled up asleep.

Sand had always been in Jade's camp, but Moon had thought Vine and Floret were closer to Pearl. Either they had changed their allegiance or they were just here to help guard this side of the nurseries and the Arbora's bowers. It made him a little edgy not to know.

Moon sat down on one side of the hearth. Stone took the other and settled into place with a groan. Flower dipped cups of tea out of the steaming pot for them, asking Stone, "Are you all right?"

He gave her a sour look. "I'm old."

Flower smiled. "We'd noticed."

Jade came in from the passage, and Chime asked her, "Are we settled for now?"

"Finally." Jade shook out her head frills and shifted to Arbora. "Everyone is convinced that we need daylight to finish exploring, and we need rest before we make plans and argue about where to put everything."

Song said, "Your consort got your bed ready."

Lifting his cup, Moon froze, self-conscious. He had made the sleeping place without even thinking about it. When he and Jade had flown to the east together, they had quickly got into the habit of taking turns, one finding and preparing a place to sleep and the other hunting for food. Aboard the flying ship, he had been recovering from his injuries and staying in a cabin with the mentors and Chime, who had been taking care of him. He realized he had no idea how to live with Jade inside a colony, and he kept running into subtleties of Raksuran behavior that he had no idea how to react to. He knew the others were staring at him, and made himself take a sip of tea as if nothing was wrong.

Jade tilted her head to study Song thoughtfully. Song's eyes widened and she said, "I was just teasing!"

"Hmm," Jade commented. She went over to the baskets and opened one to dig through it.

Chime gave Song an exasperated look, then turned to the others, obviously changing the subject. "How much food do we have left?"

"Enough for several days, plus the fresh meat from the hunt this morning," Rill answered. "We still have about half the dried meat, because the Aeriat were refusing to eat it. We're getting low on dried fruit, sava flour, dried sava, and roots."

Stone said, "There are a lot of plants in this area that we can eat. Since no one's been eating them for who knows how many turns, there should be plenty around."

Jade sat down next to Moon, then leaned over to put something on the floor in front of him. It gleamed red-gold against the wood, catching the light: it was the bracelet that Stone had taken to Star Aster, the token to be given to the new consort. Moon picked it up. Having seen more of the Arbora's artwork, he could tell now that the fluid serpentine shapes etched into the band were two entwined Raksura. He looked up to see Jade watching him, the scales on her brow faintly creased with worry.

Moon put the bracelet on, just under the knobby bone in his wrist. Jade pulled his head down and her teeth grazed the skin behind his ear in a gentle nip.

Flower cleared her throat and smiled faintly. "At least there should be plenty of game around here, too."

Stone set his cup down. "We'll need to reestablish our territory. I should be able to find the old boundaries."

Jade glanced up. "Our territory? I wouldn't think we'd need to worry..." She eyed Stone more sharply. "Unless there's another court in this area?"

"There are several. This is the home forest, where our bloodlines were first born. There used to be colonies everywhere through here. Too many." Stone shrugged. "Now there's plenty of room."

Chapter Three

Moon woke buried in blankets, with Jade warm beside him. His inner sense of the sun told him it was still some time before dawn, and the storm had calmed to the point where the wind

was barely audible. He pulled a fold of fabric down, just enough to get a good taste of the air.

Nothing had changed since last night. The others in the hall breathed deeply in sleep, except for some of the warriors on the far side of the room. From the soft noises, they were enjoying each other's company under the blankets. *Good idea*, he thought, and flipped the blanket back up to settle down again and nuzzle Jade's neck.

She slid an arm across his waist, curling around him. Nipping his ear, she whispered, "When we know we're settled here for good, we'll start a clutch."

He nodded against her cheek. He was looking forward to babies in the nurseries that had actually come from him and Jade. But first they had to make certain this place was as secure as it seemed, and that the court could find enough food in the surrounding forest. More things to consider when you were choosing a permanent place to live. He said, "We need to make a consort for Frost." Since Jade had taken Moon as consort, Frost had been demanding that they get a consort for her, occasionally remembering to request queens for Thorn and Bitter.

Jade hissed, ruefully amused. "I never realized what fledgling queens were like. I'm starting to feel a little sympathy for Pearl and Amber, when I was that age."

Moon didn't have any trouble imagining Jade as an imperious little fledgling, making Pearl's life difficult, but he wasn't going to say so. There was something else he was reluctant to bring up, but he had to know about the awkward moment last night. "What did it mean when I made a bed for you?"

This time Jade sounded more annoyed than amused. "It's an old custom. It means you want to sleep with me. Song was being a little idiot."

"I do want to sleep with you," he pointed out, emphasizing it by nuzzling her collarbone.

“Consorts have their own bowers.” Jade’s tone was teasing. She pulled him more firmly against her. “So they can be guarded and chaperoned.”

This was the first time Moon had heard about the guarding and chaperoning part. Though it made sense, with everyone being careful to inform him that consorts his age—normal consorts his age—were supposed to be shy delicate creatures who seldom ventured out of their colonies. “So you’re telling me that Stone and I are going to sleep up there above the queens’ level? Because it’s about thirty turns too late to chaperone me.”

She tugged at the tie of his pants, her claws carefully sheathed. “When Thorn and Bitter get past the fledgling stage, they’ll come out of the nurseries and they’ll need bowers. As well as any other consorts we happen to produce.”

“I don’t know how that’s going to happen, if I’m sleeping up there with Stone—”

Jade growled, and rolled on top of him, and that was the end of that conversation.



Moon drowsed for a while, and woke when Jade climbed over him to get out of their nest. He shook himself free of the blankets, stretching extravagantly.

Chime and Rill sat by the hearth basin, blearily waiting for the water kettle to boil. Flower was nowhere to be seen. Jade, who was waking the warriors by the simple method of kicking various piles of blankets, told Moon, “I’m going to take a look around, make sure everything’s all right.”

“I’ll come with you.” Moon climbed out of the blankets and pulled his clothes back on. They left while the others were still stumbling around.

Moon and Jade made a circuit of the perimeter of their new home, going first up to the greeting hall, where Knell and the soldiers said all was well. Looking around, it took Moon a moment to find Stone. He was still asleep, but in his winged form, curled around the pillars of the stairs, his black scales blending into the carving. “How does he do that?” Moon asked Jade, as they went back down to the teachers’ hall. “Sleep in his other form.” Moon could do it for short periods of time, but it didn’t give him much real rest. He hadn’t seen any of the others do it either.

Jade shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s just one of the things that

come with age.”

They walked the outer passages and found many of the Arbora already up and moving, scrubbing dirt and moss out of the bowers or the dry pools, or sorting through baskets and bags of belongings. As they passed a doorway into an unused room, Moon felt a gritty crunch underfoot and looked down. The floor was covered with broken pottery shards. He stopped to scrape the remnants off; fortunately none was sharp enough to penetrate the thick extra layers of skin on his groundling feet. Jade glanced back and said, “I hope they didn’t break anything important.”

Moon leaned into the room. More broken pottery was strewn across the floor, pieces with the same blue glaze as the tall jars stacked near the doorway. Several wooden bins, covered with delicately incised images of flowering grasses, stood against the far wall, and the lids had all been smashed. But dust had collected on the splintered debris. He stepped into the room to look into the bins, but they were all empty, except for mold. “This wasn’t one of us. It’s old.”

“I suppose they were broken when the old court left.” Jade dismissed it, turning away.

They moved on and took the next stairs down to the level below. At the bottom, they met Pearl, trailed by River, Drift, Coil, and a few other Aeriat, all in groundling form. Pearl flicked her spines at Jade and said, “Where’s Stone? We have decisions to make.”

Jade flicked her spines back. “He’s in the greeting hall, still asleep.”

The other warriors avoided Moon’s gaze, but River gave him a look of pure contempt. Pretending to ignore him, Moon folded his arms, so the sleeve of his shirt tugged up, revealing the gold bracelet. River looked away, seething.

Pearl said, “Then come with me.” And as if she couldn’t bear to leave the encounter on a mostly neutral note, jerked her head toward Moon and added, “Leave that.” She started up the stairs and her obedient warriors trailed behind.

Jade hissed at her retreating back, then turned to Moon. “Go on,” he told her, before she could speak. During the Fell attack, Pearl had had no choice about including Jade in governing the court, or what had been left of the court. If she was continuing that now, without Stone or Flower or anyone else to cajole her, it had to be a good thing.

Jade hesitated, lashing her tail. “I suppose I’d better.” She caught his shirt, pulled him close, and rubbed her cheek against his. “I’ll tell

you what we talk about.”

Jade stepped back, jumped up to catch the wall of the stairwell, and Moon went to look for something to do. Pearl’s attitude didn’t bite as much as it might have. A real consort would probably have been bitterly offended at the slight.

Of course, it probably wasn’t good that he didn’t think of himself as a real consort.

He followed the sounds of activity to the passage outside and the platform where the flying boats were anchored. The door stood open, and he shifted to make the jump from it down to the wet grass. The sunlight falling through the canopy was bright and tinged with green, and the air was fresh from the rain, heavy with the intriguing scents of the damp forest. A few Arbora were unloading the last supplies from the *Indala*’s hold, while others tramped around in the mud of the platform, digging and looking for roots among the trailing vines. Niran, Blossom, and Chime stood on the *Valendera*’s deck, talking and looking up at the mast. Both boats seemed to have come through the storm with no serious damage, which must have been a relief to Niran.

Moon saw Flower standing knee-deep in the muddy grass, the only Arbora out here in groundling form, and went over to her. “They’re having a meeting in the greeting hall.”

She nodded absently. “I know. I’ve already had my say with Pearl. I think we should all live in the teachers’ levels for now. It’ll do everyone good to be all jumbled together.”

At the old colony, the Aeriats had lived slightly apart from the Arbora, and the hunters and soldiers had had separate bowers from the teachers and the small group of mentors. And the tree’s living quarters seemed to be designed for that same system. Moon flexed his claws and prodded thoughtfully at a root buried in the grass. “That’s not normal, is it?”

“No, but in thriving courts, living by caste doesn’t seem to create problems.” Leaning down to pull up the root, Flower added, “At the old colony, it just caused more trouble. We’d all been moving apart, separating into factions, losing our sense of each other.”

Moon had seen some of that, when one of the hunters had told him he should be sleeping in the upper levels with the Aeriats instead of down in the teachers’ bowers. Since by that point Moon had been ordered out of the court by both Arbora and Aeriats, he hadn’t seen much difference between them. And he had liked Petal, who had been the leader of the teachers before Bell. She had been one of the small

group who had made Moon feel welcome in the court. As Flower paused and crouched to examine the leaves of a vine, Moon said, "Everybody was jumbled together on the boats."

"Being jumbled together in comfort may be more productive." Flower looked up at him, but from her expression her thoughts were on something else. "We'll have to see what happens. It's been turns and turns since this court was out from under Fell influence."

The same could be said for Moon, though he hadn't realized it until lately. It still wasn't something he wanted to think about too closely.

Chime glided down from the *Valendera's* deck and landed beside them. He said, "Everything came through the storm fine. I don't think we'll have to do much work before we send the boats back."

The plan was to loan Niran a crew of *Arbora* and *Aeriat* to help him sail the ships back to the Golden Isles, then the *Aeriat* could fly the *Arbora* back to the colony. It would be a long flight, but it was the only way to get the ships back. "Who's going with him?" Moon asked.

"We haven't gotten to that part yet." Chime scratched his head frills. "Blossom knows the most about how to steer the boats, and Bead knows the second most, but they'll need more *Aeriat*." He looked down, the tip of his tail twitching uneasily. "I'm thinking of going myself."

"You are?" Taken aback, Moon stared at him. "Why?" Chime had never spent a night away from the old colony before the trip to the Golden Isles, and he hadn't given the impression that he particularly liked to travel.

Chime shrugged. "I thought I'd do something useful."

Flower eyed him thoughtfully, and he seemed determined to avoid her gaze. Moon reminded himself Chime wouldn't be leaving permanently.

Strike, one of the younger hunters, bounded out of the doorway and landed in the mud with a loud squelch. He hurried over, saying, "Flower, Knell has some things he wants to show you, down in the lower levels."

Moon and Chime hadn't seen anything below this level, so they followed Flower back inside and down the stairwell. Strike led the way off the stairs into a wide high-ceilinged foyer, but Chime stopped to stare at the carving along the curving wall. "What happened here?"

Moon paused to look, as Flower and Strike continued down the passage. The carving covered most of the wall, a detailed depiction of

a seascape, with tall rocky islands rising above ocean waves. But it was covered with holes, as if someone had struck at it with a knife or a chisel. Moon touched one of the gouges and felt rough tool marks and splinters. "Somebody pried out whatever was in here." There must have been inlaid stones, like the carvings in the Aeriad levels.

"What a waste." Chime brushed chips away from a section, distressed. "They broke through all the writing here."

Bead wandered in through another doorway, and saw them examining the carving. She said, "I noticed that too. Whoever carved it must have wanted to take the inlay with her when the court left. I'm going to fix it when I have a chance. Spice has some nice chips of amethyst that I could polish up and fit in there."

Moon touched an undamaged corner that depicted two warriors crouched on a branch, overlooking the scene. "They never show anybody in groundling form." He had noticed that particularly in the upper levels yesterday.

"Not often," Bead admitted, absently brushing more splinters out of the chiseled lines. "It's traditional that queens and consorts are only depicted in their winged forms. You can show warriors in groundling form, but they get all spine-ruffled about it. Arbora sometimes show each other in groundling form, but it's not common."

Chime was still occupied by the broken carving. He picked at one of the gaps with a claw. "It's like they bashed it out with a rock."

"They must have been in a hurry." Bead seemed to have too much on her mind to give the mystery much attention. "Oh, we found a forge down here, a big one, all lined with metal and stone. Pottery ovens, too. We should be able to get it all going again as soon as we unpack our tools."

Chime turned away from the carving, distracted. "Are there more workrooms?"

Bead pointed toward a passage. "Huge ones, down that way."

As they headed in that direction, Moon asked Chime, "How are you going to find metal in this forest?"

"There are rock outcrops scattered all over the forest floor, some of them with veins of ore. The old records have maps to the ones on our territory. And we can trade with other courts. Once we find the other courts." Chime's brow furrowed. "If they want to trade with us."

Moon followed Chime down the stairs, finding three levels of large airy chambers, all facing into another central well. The walls were covered with carvings here too, a whole landscape of Raksura,

Arbora and Aeriat, queens and consorts, woven in with unfamiliar symbols, plants, animals. Suspended over the well was a wooden ball studded with the white light-shells, in all different shapes and sizes. "This is more room than we ever had before," Chime said, sounding overcome, his eyes on the glyphs carved above the round doorways. "For weaving, carving, pottery, metalwork..." He moved toward one of the rooms, pausing on the threshold.

Moon stepped past him. Merit was inside, along with a few hunters and teachers. It was a big room, winding far back into the tree, the walls lined with shelves. They stretched up to the curving ceiling, the material a richly-colored green and white stone, like polished agate. "What's this for?" Moon asked.

Chime turned abruptly and walked out to the well, stepped over the edge and fell out of sight.

Merit watched him go, his face set in a sympathetic wince. He told Moon, "It's the mentors' libraries."

And a too-pointed reminder that Chime wasn't a mentor anymore. Moon went out to the well and jumped down to the next level, then the next. He found Chime at the bottom, in a central chamber not nearly as grand, sitting beside a large dry pool filled with turns' worth of dead moss. More doorways led off this level, and from the comments of the Arbora who were exploring them, these were storerooms.

Moon sat down beside Chime, curling his tail out of the way. Chime slumped over, his spines drooping in dejection. After a moment, he said, "We don't have nearly enough books to fill those shelves. We must have lost so much."

Moon said, "Maybe they just left a lot of extra room." But he was thinking about the ruined books he had found on the flying island back in the east. Moving a court as large as this one had been, there must have been so many things that had had to be left behind, or let fall to the wayside.

Chime snorted in bitter disbelief. "Not that it's any of my business. That's for the mentors to worry about."

Moon didn't know what to say to that. Chime wasn't a mentor anymore, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. He watched the Arbora go in and out of doorways across the chamber, exclaiming over the things they were finding, making plans. "What did you do? Besides being a mentor."

It was probably the wrong question, but maybe Chime needed to

talk about it. Moon was beginning to understand how important their crafts were to the Arbora. There was no pressing need for weapons or any other metalwork, or new crockery, or for Bead to fix the damaged carving. But they were anxious to get the forge running, and had been just as pleased at finding pottery ovens as they had been at finding the herd of grasseaters at the lake. And nobody had turned the inside of this tree into a living work of art unless they wanted to, unless they wanted it as much as Moon wanted to fly.

Chime rubbed his eyes. "I painted. The leather cases for keeping paper, and for holding books together. You harden the leather with a paste, then decorate it." He took a sharp breath. "I know it doesn't sound like much—"

"Why can't you still do it? It's not like you need to be a shaman to paint." Just because Chime had lost one ability, Moon didn't see the use of giving up everything.

Chime sighed, frustrated. "I've been afraid to try. What if I can't anymore, like I can't heal or augur or anything? At the Dwei hive, when Heart wasn't strong enough to put you into a healing sleep, I tried. I thought maybe I just had to be desperate to make it work now. But it didn't. And you could have died."

Moon shook his head. "You should try to paint. Then you'd know." Chime grimaced at the thought and looked away. "Yes, that's the point of not trying."

There wasn't an answer for that, either.

A voice above them said, "Moon? Chime?" It was Strike again, hanging one-handed from the edge of the balcony above. "Flower wants you to come see something. I'm supposed to go get the queens and Stone." That didn't sound good. "What is it?" Moon asked, pushing to his feet.

Strike waved his free hand. "Nobody knows—that's the problem!"



Before hurrying up to the greeting hall, Strike pointed them back to the passage that led in toward the center of the trunk, and they found the way by following the trail of lit shells.

Flower and Knell stood in a junction of two passages, and at first Moon thought the dark, irregular blot on the wall was a shadow. But as they drew closer he saw it was something smudged on the wood itself. It stretched all the way up to the curving ceiling, and down to the smooth floor. The scent was like rot, like wood left in water until it softened and fell apart.

“What is it?” Chime demanded, and stepped close to peer at it. “A fungus?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Knell said, giving him a thoughtful glance. “The hunters saw it last night, when they came through here to make certain there was no danger, but they thought it was just moss. Today I saw there were spots of it all down these inner passages.”

Flower had made a small stone glow with light, and held it close to the dark splotch, studying it intently. “Moon, have you ever heard groundlings speak of anything like this? A blight that kills trees?”

“Kills trees?” Moon stepped forward, startled. He had thought this was a curiosity, not a threat. “This tree?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Flower beckoned him closer. “Look. This isn’t a growth on the wood, it’s the wood itself.”

Moon leaned close. She was right. The dark spongy substance still showed the grain. He touched it, pushing gently, and his claw sunk through. “I’ve never seen anything like it.” The Hassi had had a problem with fungus in their orchards on top of the link-trees, but it had been a mushroom-like growth that made the fruit turn sour, nothing like this.

Chime stepped down the wall, and picked cautiously at the damaged wood. It flaked away under his touch. “It doesn’t look like blight. It looks like the wood is just dying, for no reason.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Flower stepped back, her face etched with worry. “Because that’s what it looks like to me, too.”

Knell grimaced and shook his head in denial. “But this tree must be hundreds and hundreds of turns old. How can...”

Moon wasn’t sure how Knell meant to finish that sentence. Maybe *How can our luck be this bad?* that Indigo Cloud had come back to this place just as the ancient tree was finally failing.

He heard movement behind him and caught Jade’s distinctive scent, then Stone’s. He glanced up just as Stone came around the curve of the passage.

Stone’s reaction answered one question. Moon had just had time to form a slight suspicion that Stone might have known about this when he had brought the court here, that he had meant this to be only a temporary resting place, not a permanent home, and he just hadn’t bothered to inform anyone of his plans. But Stone was in groundling form, and as he stopped in the passage, his expression of shock was easy to read. Moon found himself wishing his suspicion had been

right. At least then there might have been a plan for what to do next.

Stone put one hand on the wall. "This is heartwood."

Jade stepped past him, and worriedly looked up at the blight spread across the curve of the ceiling. "What's heartwood?"

He grimaced. "It's the core of the tree. It can't die, because it doesn't grow, it doesn't change."

"Then what is this?" Flower pointed to the blight.

Stone abruptly turned away, back up the passage. There was a startled moment of hesitation, then they all scrambled to follow.

They passed Pearl and River out in the stairwell and Knell skittered to a halt to explain. Stone tore past out into the big hall with the Arbora workrooms. He jumped down into the well, shifted into his winged form in mid-air, then caught the lip of a gallery and climbed rapidly straight down the wall. Moon leapt after him, the others following.

He thought Stone was going all the way down to the roots, so was caught unprepared when Stone suddenly whipped over a balcony three levels down. Moon caught a pillar with his tail to stop himself, and swung up and onto the balcony.

Stone took a passage toward the interior, flowing down it like a dark cloud. His tail whipped back and forth, and Moon hung back to avoid being struck.

Then Stone stopped abruptly in front of a large hollow in the wall. Moon slid to a halt and backed up hastily, out of tail range, just in case Stone hadn't wanted to be followed. But Stone shifted to groundling, and stepped forward into the hollow.

Now that the bulk of Stone's other form wasn't blocking the way, Moon saw there was a plaque at the back of the hollow, large enough to be covering a doorway, with a carving of intertwined branches with leaves and fruit. "The bolts are broken," Stone said, and touched the carving.

As the others caught up, Moon shifted to groundling and stepped forward to look. Broken pieces from the side of the plaque lay on the floor near the wall, as if they had been kicked out of the way. He hissed under his breath, the realization making him cold. *Like the carving in the stairwell. Like the broken bins and jars.* He looked at Stone, whose face was still with suppressed fury. *Someone's been here before us.*

From behind them, Pearl said harshly, "Stone, what is this?"

What's wrong?"

"I don't know yet." Stone shoved at the plaque, and with a raw creak it swung open, revealing a dark opening. It released the strong scent of stale air laced with a faint sweetness. Stone snarled and stepped inside. "Flower, make a light!"

Flower hurried forward, lifting the spelled rock she had used to examine the rotting wall. Moon moved aside for her, and she slipped through the doorway after Stone.

The light revealed an oval chamber, the walls rough and unworked, just dark, warm wood. There were no light-shells mounted anywhere either, as if no one was meant to be in here. Then Moon looked down at the floor. It was covered with white tendrils, like the exposed roots of a plant. The resemblance to something that lay in wait on the ground to whip up and grab unsuspecting passers-by made Moon jerk back, and he bumped into Jade.

She took his shoulders and moved him aside, and said quietly, "Stone, talk to us. What is it?"

Stone hissed, passing a hand over his face. "Someone's been in here and taken the seed. It should be there, in the cradle."

Moon craned his neck to look. In the center of the tendrils was an empty space, round, not much bigger than a melon. The tendrils around it were cut and had turned dark with rot. Stone continued, "The seed is what changes an ordinary mountain-tree into a colony tree, that lets the Arbora shape the tree and change it. Without it, the tree is rotting from the inside out."

For a stretched moment the room was silent. *He said something was wrong*, Moon thought. Up in the consorts' bowers yesterday, Stone had been uneasy. Not because of old memories, or seeing the place in this empty state after so long away. Because the tree itself must have felt different, wrong.

Flower groaned under her breath. River twitched uneasily and looked at Pearl, who stood like a statue. Then Jade let out her breath in a low hiss. She said, "Can you tell how long it's been gone?"

Stone scrubbed a hand through his hair in frustration. "No. I'm not a mentor."

Everyone looked at Flower, who lifted a hand helplessly. "I'll have to look through our histories. I've never even seen a mountain-tree before, and I can't augur the past."

"They wouldn't have taken it with them?" Jade persisted. "The court, Indigo and Cloud, when they left?"

“No.” Stone sounded certain about that. “There’s no other use for it, and it has to stay with the colony tree, or the tree dies.” He looked at her, his gaze sharp. “It can’t have been missing long. I came here two turns ago, to make sure nothing had happened, that the tree was still livable. It didn’t feel wrong then. And I think the blight would be worse if the seed had been gone for turns and turns.”

“It could be worse.” Chime sounded sick. “We haven’t had a chance to look at the roots yet.”

Everyone stared at him, and River growled.

“What did the seed look like?” Moon asked. Everyone turned to him, and he clarified, “Is it covered with jewels or metal? Is there any reason to steal it besides making another colony tree?” He was wondering if other Raksura had taken it, though that didn’t make much sense. Why take a seed to make a colony tree when there was a perfectly good colony tree, uninhabited and ready to occupy, right here?

“No, it looks like a seed,” Stone said. “Like it’s made of wood.”

“It must be a powerful artifact, though.” Flower bit her lip as she leaned down to touch one of the cut tendrils. “There are many magics something like that might be used for.”

Moon stirred uneasily. Like the way the Golden Islanders used the rock from inside flying islands to make their boats fly. That wasn’t a pleasant thought. If someone had stolen the thing for magic, it could have been cut to pieces, destroyed, anything.

“Maybe they stole other things.” Chime turned to the others. “We saw a carving that was damaged where the inlay had been pried out. Whoever did this must have passed that way.”

Jade nodded, her expression grim. “We’ve seen other things broken, in ways that didn’t make sense. As if someone was searching.”

Moon added, “They didn’t get as far up as the Aeriatic levels. The stones are still in the carvings there.” The inlay was all up and down the main stairwell; the intruders couldn’t have missed it.

Stone’s eyes narrowed. “If they left other signs they were here—”

Pearl snarled suddenly, furious, and the sound echoed off the walls. Everyone but Stone twitched, and even he bared his teeth. Her voice a growl, she said, “These thieves left a trail! Find it!”



The trail might be old, but last night the hunters had been looking for predator scat and traces of recent occupation, not signs

that intruders had searched the tree within the past couple of turns. Now that they knew what they were looking for, it wasn't hard to find.

There wasn't enough dirt or moss on most of the floors to show tracks, but on the level below, off a main stairwell, two hunters reported finding a room with more smashed storage jars. Others found several more carvings, on passage walls and the pillars supporting a lower stairwell, where inlaid stones had been pried out. "They were in a hurry," Moon told Jade as they climbed down the well in the Arbora levels. "They could have checked every carving in the tree for inlay, but they didn't."

"It's as if they knew exactly what they wanted, and didn't waste any time once they found it," she agreed grimly, and swung down onto the next balcony.

The trail led to a level far below the Arbora's workrooms and the storerooms. This part of the tree had smaller passages and wells, narrower stairs woven through and around thick folds of wood. The floors were lumpy and the walls had been left rough and undecorated. Moon and Jade followed a passage toward the tree's outer trunk, and found Knell and a group of soldiers and hunters there.

As Stone and Pearl arrived, Knell said, "All the doors down here are sealed from the inside, so the hunters assumed no one had used them since the court left." He ran his thumb along the seam where the door met the wall. "But the other doors have a thick crust here, hard as rock, from turns of wind and rain forcing dirt through the cracks from the outside." He glanced up. "This one doesn't."

Pearl hissed. "Open it."

"Wait." Stone frowned at the door. "Let the Aeriats scout it from the outside first."

Jade regarded him doubtfully. "You don't think whatever took the seed is still out there?"

"I don't know what I think." Stone's voice was dry. "I just know I'm against the idea of opening any convenient passages to the ground at the moment."

"Very well." Pearl sounded as if it was an effort not to growl. Her spines twitched with impatience. "Hurry."



With Stone, Chime, Vine, Root, and a few other Aeriats, Moon went up to the knothole entrance to take flight, making a cautious spiral down the outside of the tree.

They dropped past more platforms, through the spray of the waterfall. Some of the overgrown foliage was still flattened from the rain, but Moon spotted berry bushes, yellow vines that might be whiteroot, and tall slender nut-trees. They dropped further, until the sun was dimmed to a deep green twilight. The ground was thick with fern trees, their fronds spreading like giant parasols. The mountain-tree's roots were huge, great ridges of wood sloping down from the massive wall of the trunk and running out and away. Moon didn't sense any large animal movement, and the air tasted of the musk of small treelings. A whole tribe of greenfurred ones fled shrieking as Stone dropped down to perch on a root.

The run-off of the tree's cascade formed a shallow marsh. Much of it was choked with weeds and lilies, but there were flat rocks arranged in a way that looked deliberate, and a lot of white objects that from this distance looked like flowers.

Moon landed on the upper ridge of another root, as Chime and the others lighted around him. He crouched for a closer look at the marshy water below and saw the white objects weren't flowers; they were the elaborate spiraled shells of snails, some as big as his head, with blue and green speckled bodies. Chime climbed down beside him, and said, "They must have cultivated these for food. I don't think we need any more lights, but we could use the shells for jewelry."

Moon gave him a look. "Because you all need more jewelry." From above them, Vine called out, "I think the door is through here!" Moon glanced up. Vine had landed higher on the root, where the ridge sloped up toward the bulk of the tree, looming over them like a giant cliff. He leaned down to peer into a cave-like opening in the living wood.

Moon hopped up to join him; the others scrambled to follow. The opening extended back into the tree, festooned with vines and stained with moss. He tasted the air, but there was no predator scent, and he couldn't sense any movement. He looked back at Stone, who climbed up the broad root, then shifted to groundling. He brushed past Moon to walk into the cave.

Moon swung inside and dropped down beside Stone. Only dim light made it this deep into the crevice, but Moon could see that a path had been formed in the wood, leading in toward the trunk. The path was heavily coated with dead fern fronds and beetle husks and seemed to dead-end in a flat wall of rough wood. Then he saw the steps cut into the wall, and the round shape of the door, about ten paces up.

Stone stopped so suddenly Moon brushed his shoulder. Stone

looked down at a hollow in the side of the path. Leaf mold had piled up in it, washed there by rain. He knelt suddenly and dug through the detritus. Moon realized the mold covered a huddle of yellowed bones, still wrapped in disintegrating cloth and leather.

“What is it?” Vine asked from behind them.

“Bones. Looks like one of them didn’t make it far.” Moon crouched down for a closer look as Stone dug out the body, which had fallen or been shoved into the hollow.

Moon asked him, “It’s not there?” He didn’t think there was much hope that the seed had been left behind. It wouldn’t be that easy.

“No.” Stone stood, his jaw set in frustration.

Chime slipped past Vine and Stone and crouched down to poke at the remains. Root and the others crowded around to see.

Moon picked up the skull, but without flesh there wasn’t anything to tell him what species it was. In shape it didn’t seem much different from his own groundling form, but it could have bare skin, fur, scales, feathers.

Still digging through the leaf mold, Chime pulled out a handful of small metal disks, badly tarnished. “I think those are buttons. There’s some thick leather down here, maybe a belt... There’s more than one here. There’s too many bones, and this.” He held up another part of a skull, this one with the jaw sheared off.

Moon heard a thump and twitched around, then realized it had come from the sealed door. Root bounced up to the doorway and knocked on it. After a moment it creaked, cracked, and then slid open, releasing a shower of dead bug shells. “We found groundlings!” Root reported.

Stone growled, irritated. “Groundlings that have been dead a turn.”

The others spilled out of the doorway, and Jade landed beside Stone. She looked down at the bones, frowning in dissatisfaction. “Well, at least we know it was groundlings, and that they came here about a turn or so ago.”

“This door doesn’t open from outside, and it was still sealed with a bar,” Knell said as he climbed down the wall. “They must have had help, someone who could fly up to the knothole, to get inside, and then let the others in down here.”

“One of us?” Song wondered. “A Raksura?”

“Or something else that could fly or climb.” Moon put the skull

back on the pile of bones and stood. “It doesn’t have to be a Raksura.”

“Or they got some solitary to do it for them—” Root began, then twitched his spines in confusion. “Oh, sorry, Moon.”

Moon controlled his annoyance. Even during a crisis this serious, nobody forgot who had been a feral solitary.

Chime flicked his tail at Root. “The question is, how do we track them?”

Knell edged past Stone to examine at the groundling bones. “It’s been too long. We can’t track them.”

“We should search anyway,” Jade said, and looked up to where Pearl sat crouched in the doorway. “If they left their dead behind, they might have left other traces, some sign of where they came from.”

From Pearl’s expression and the angle of her spines, she had already gone from righteously angry to depressed. Moon didn’t think that was a particularly good sign. One of the problems at the old colony had been Pearl’s growing apathy; necessity, and being away from the Fell’s influence, had shaken her out of it. Now would be a terrible time for her to slip backward.

The moment stretched to an uncomfortable point. Then Pearl settled her spines, and said, “Go and search. Maybe they were careless.”

Moon felt the others’ relief. Their chances of finding something didn’t matter; the important thing was that their reigning queen wasn’t giving up. Or at least if she was, she was managing to hide it.

Jade acted as if she hadn’t noticed the lapse, and told Knell, “Send someone for Bone. We need all the hunters.”

Chapter Four

They started the search through the strange twilight world of the mountain-tree's roots, finding their way through the hanging moss and vines, the forests of fern trees, and the marshes. The teachers

and the rest of the Aeriats had been told to keep searching the inside of the tree and up into the branches, on the chance that some trace of the thieves had been left inside.

Moon searched the ground with the hunters, but he didn't hold out much hope. Unless the groundlings had camped for a long period while trying to find a way into the tree, the damp and time would have wiped out any sign of them. And if they did find old evidence of a camp, it wasn't as though there would still be tracks to follow.

But there just wasn't anything else they could do at the moment. Casting over the ground in a stand of reeds, he passed a clearing where Jade, Stone, and Flower were talking. He heard Jade ask Stone, "Does it have to be that seed? Can we get another?"

Stone didn't sound hopeful. "I don't know. Maybe."

Flower wasn't as discouraged. "I told Heart and Merit and the others to unpack the court's library. The answer should be somewhere there. I'm going to join them now."

Moon continued through the reeds, working his way further out. *If we could get another seed...* It was a hope to hold onto, at least.

As the roots spread further away from the mountain-tree, they grew smaller, only as big around as the trunks of the big fern trees. Some roots arched up off the ground, forming fantastic shapes, supporting curtains of moss and vines.

Then Bramble, one of the hunters, slipped out of the brush and made a faint clicking noise, beckoning Moon. Startled, Moon ducked under the foliage to follow her. He had been so convinced they wouldn't find anything.

They came to a tall thatch of big green flowers with brilliantly red centers. Bramble crouched in its cover and pointed.

Not far past the flowers was a shallow pond, barely more than a widened section of stream. It was home to a collection of snails with dark brown shells. And there was something crouched over the pool, watching the snails.

It was a groundling, but of a kind Moon had never seen before. Its legs and arms were skinny as sticks, lightly furred, and its torso was narrow and flat, and seemed to be all ribs; its stomach and bowels must be tiny, and he couldn't tell where it kept its sex organs. The head was squarish, eyes and mouth round, the nose just a slit. It had vines draped around its body, or maybe they were growing on its skin; it seemed to wear them like clothes.

Moon would have been half-inclined to think it was just a big treeling, but it had a bag slung over one shoulder, made of braided grasses, and a couple of sharpened sticks lay beside it on the rocks. Moon also thought a treeling would have noticed them by now. He looked inquiringly at Bramble, who shrugged to show she had no idea either.

It didn't look at all like the dead groundling, but if it lived here it might know something about the theft. Moon eased forward, and made a clicking noise in his throat.

The groundling glanced absently around, saw him, and froze. Then it shrieked, bounced up, and splashed across the pool to dodge off between the ferns.

"Go get the others," Moon told Bramble, and lunged after it.

He caught up with it in two bounds, landed on top of the curve of a root as it ran beneath. He could have caught it, but he was afraid if he dropped on it his weight would crush it like a bundle of sticks.

It ran through another stand of trees and he jumped to the ground to follow. Several hunters caught up with Moon just as he reached the end of the copse and slid to a halt. He had found a village.

Big round structures, huts made of woven sticks, hung from the undersides of the tallest roots, connected by elaborate webs of vine rope. There were dozens of them, strung all back through this part of the roots, as far as Moon could see. More of the strange groundlings gathered on the ground below. They sat on grass mats, weaving vines or sorting through piles of vegetation. They stared in blank surprise at Moon and the hunters. Some leapt to their feet or called out, but none made threatening gestures.

Chime dropped down next to Moon, and a moment later Stone walked out of the trees. Stone was still in his groundling form, which was probably a good thing, since they didn't want to terrify these people.

"These aren't anything like the dead groundlings we found," Chime said, studying the strangers. "The ribs were too big."

Stone eyed the nervous groundlings. “These are Kek. They’re native to this forest, like we are.”

Jade landed beside Moon and folded her wings. Song came up behind them, while Root and Vine perched on the fern tree branches overhead. The hunters gathered around, their spines pricked with curiosity. Jade said, “These people live under the roots?”

Stone said, “They’re good for the tree. They help keep the soil around it healthy. We didn’t have any Kek when the court left. They were dying out in this part of the forest.” He stepped forward, holding out empty hands.

One of the Kek came toward them as the others gathered nervously behind it. It looked old, as far as Moon could tell. Its body was thin even by Kek standards, and it had lots of white stringy things hanging off it in odd places. It was wearing a necklace of small shells, and carried a staff with tattered leaves attached to the end.

Stone added, “They don’t have any reason to take the seed. But they might have seen who did.”



With Jade and Chime, Moon sat down on the spongy carpet of moss that covered the ground and listened to Stone talk to the Kek. The Aeriats and the hunters gathered behind them, perched in the fern trees, and the other Kek, reassured by Stone’s overtures, came out to gather around their leader. Some tiny Kek, the young of the tribe, peered at them from the safety of the hanging huts.

Fortunately Stone could speak a pidgin version of the Kek language, which he had learned when he was a boy, who knew how many turns ago. The old leader, whose name was something that sounded like “Kof,” could speak a pidgin version of Raksuran, but not Altanic or Kedaic or anything else Moon recognized. With gestures and a lot of fumbling for words, Stone drew out their story.

These Kek had left the roots of their original colony tree when their population became too large for comfort, splitting off from the main tribe. When applied to for help, the Raksura there had given them directions to this colony tree, long abandoned, and they had traveled across the ground in search of it, finally reaching it about twenty turns ago.

“They know a lot about us,” Chime said hopefully, “Maybe they took the seed for safe-keeping or something and they’ll give it back when we ask.”

To that optimistic suggestion, Stone replied, "Shut up." Moon nudged Chime with his shoulder in sympathy. But he didn't think there was much hope that the Kek had taken the seed. If the Kek knew a lot about colony trees and depended on their roots as a place to live, they would know better than to do anything that might hurt one. He couldn't see these delicate creatures breaking bins and jars searching for treasure, or knocking inlay out of carvings. They didn't even wear wooden beads; everything they had was made from plants, with flowers or snail and insect shells for ornaments.

And when Stone asked about strange groundlings coming here recently, Kof shook his staff in assent.

It had been when the warm rain season ended and the cool rain season started with the second growth of the moss-flowers, which Stone identified as being a little more than a turn ago. When he asked if the groundlings had come on foot, Kof had waved vaguely.

"They must have come on foot. They couldn't get a wagon through here," Moon put in.

"They might have had a flying boat, like the Islanders," Jade said. "That would have been more of a clue to where they came from."

Stone coaxed out more information. Apparently Kof hadn't seen them himself. The Kek who had approached them to talk had been attacked, and three killed. The village had feared they were being invaded, and all had fled to a safer position on the far side of the tree. But the scouts who had stayed behind had seen the groundlings enter through one of the doorways in the roots.

"How did they open it?" Jade asked, overriding several people trying to ask the same question, including Moon and Chime. Some of the Kek jerked back in alarm.

Stone paused to hiss for quiet. Kof lifted his hands. "Do not know. Door opened."

"What then?" Stone asked.

After a time, the scouts had seen the strange groundlings leave through the same door. Not long after that the groundlings had left the area, a process which Kof described with vague waving motions. When the Kek had ventured to investigate, they had found the door closed again.

"That doesn't tell us much more than we already knew," Jade said, tapping her claws impatiently. "What did the groundlings look like? Did they have skin or fur?"

Stone translated the question, but Kof scratched his chin tendrils

thoughtfully, not seeming to understand. Moon shifted to groundling, which caused a stir among the Kek. Apparently it had been a long time since they had seen a Raksura shift. He leaned forward beside Stone, and pushed his sleeve up and held out his arm. "Skin like this, like we have, or something else?" Stone held out his arm too, dull gray next to Moon's dark bronze.

Kof reached out and touched Stone's arm, then Moon's; it was like being gently brushed with sticks. Kof turned and spent a few moments consulting the other Kek, some of whom had presumably seen the groundlings. Then he spoke to Stone again, who translated, "At least some of them had bare skin like our groundling forms. They didn't see many of them closely, so the others might have been different." He added to Kof, "But your scouts didn't kill any? Up in the root passage near the doorway?"

Kof replied with an emphatic negative. The strange groundlings were strong, and had metal weapons, and the Kek knew they couldn't survive a battle. They had hoped only for the strangers to leave, and once the strangers had, they hoped they never came back.

"Tell him they won't come back," Jade said, propping her chin on her hand, disappointed. "They got what they wanted."

□

They left the Kek, who were happy to have the colony tree inhabited again, even though Stone had told them it might not be permanent. When they got back to the greeting hall, Stone went up to lie on the floor of the queens' level and growl at anyone who came near him. Pearl disappeared, probably to barricade herself in a bower with River and her other favorites. Bone went down to report the conversation to Flower and the other mentors, who were trying to find information about the seed in the court's library.

Moon ended up standing in the teachers' hall with Jade, Chime, and a dispirited collection of Aeriad and Arbora. "What do we do?" Bell asked, glancing uncertainly at Rill. "We were going to clean out the rest of the bowers on this level, and start working on the gardens, but..."

"The flying boats need repairs before we send them back," Blossom added, then made an exasperated gesture. "I mean, even if we have to use them again, they still need work."

"And we still have to eat." Bead shrugged wearily.

Jade twitched her spines in half-hearted agreement. "Whatever happens, we'll be staying here for a time. The hunters will search for

game, with the warriors to make scouting flights and guard them. The others can keep making the bowers comfortable, and start the repairs to the flying boats.”

Everyone seemed relieved to have a decision made; even if they didn’t know what to do in the long run, at least they knew what to do now.

As the group dispersed, Moon caught Chime’s frustrated expression. He nudged him with an elbow. “Go help Flower and the others.”

Chime hesitated. “You think I should?”

“That’s more important right now.” From the way the others were talking, all the hunters and most of the warriors were going out to hunt. They didn’t need Chime, and the mentors could probably use all the help they could get.

After a moment of indecision, Chime nodded. He seemed relieved to have something to do that he felt confident about. “You’re right. I’ll go help with the books.”

As Chime left, Jade said, “I’ll go down and help them as well. I don’t know as much about the library as a mentor, but the last few turns I haven’t done much more than study.”

Moon realized he had been assuming that he was going on the hunt. “Uh, do you mind if I go hunting?”

She tilted her head, giving him a sideways look. “Would it matter if I did?”

A little stung, Moon said stiffly, “Yes.” Then he hesitated and found himself adding more honestly, “Probably.”

Jade sighed, but it was wry. She said, “Go on.”

Moon went.

□

The hunt turned out to be almost interesting enough to distract Moon from worrying about their immediate future. With a group of Aeriats, he scouted the suspended forest, finding that grasseaters lived on the platforms of the mountain-trees. After a consultation with Bone, they decided to focus their attention on a herd of jumping grasseaters that looked like the eastern bando-hoppers, except with dull green fur, horns, and much meaner dispositions.

The colony tree’s platforms weren’t connected to those of the surrounding trees, though the Arbora had found the remnants of

wooden bridges, long since collapsed. The Aeriats flew the hunters over to a platform near the bando-hopper-like creatures, and the hunters took it from there, finding their way from tree to tree, leaping or swinging down to the lower platforms, crossing branches, or climbing the swathes of greenery to the higher levels.

In a clearing on one of the platforms, perched on a dead hopper, Moon watched the end of the hunt. They still needed to identify the big predators in the area, and the Aeriats would have a lot more scouting to do, but he could believe that this suspended forest was the place the Arbora had been meant to live. The green-tinged sunlight was bright, the place sang with birdsong, the breeze, over the blood and dead hopper, was laced with the scents of a hundred different flowers. As Bone dragged another carcass into the clearing, Moon said, "This is a good place."

"Well." Bone straightened up and shook blood out of his head frills. "It would have been." He sounded resigned.

Moon didn't think it was time for resignation yet. "We fought off a Fell flight that had crossbreed mentors," he pointed out.

Bone sighed. "If we had something to fight, I wouldn't worry."

When the hunters called a halt, Moon helped transport the carcasses back to the colony. They had enough fresh meat for the whole court for a few days, and the Arbora could dry some to store. The hunters took over the skinning and butchering, and Moon flew to one of the platforms to stand under a small waterfall, rinsing his scales off. He had fond memories of the hot water baths at the old colony, heated by rocks that the mentors spelled to give off warmth. They could have much the same set-up here, once they cleaned out the moss and figured out how to get the water to flow back into the pools throughout the tree. If they were here long enough.

To dry his wings, he flew over to the platform where the flying boats were docked and landed on the *Valendera's* deck. A group of Arbora worked on the ship under Niran's direction and Blossom's watchful eye, sanding away claw marks, patching holes, and winding new ropes. The news had already spread, and Moon found Niran unexpectedly sympathetic. "It's similar to the loss of a ship's sustainer," he said, leaning on the railing. "The rock that forms flying islands is hard to obtain for those who have no means to reach it. Instead of trying to purchase it, some try to steal it." He shook his head. "But we know where to get more, and we don't live in our ships."

Blossom leaned on the railing beside him, her spines and frills

drooping with depression. “I don’t know what we’re going to do. We were all counting on living here.”

“Can’t you find another place to live in this forest?” Niran asked. It was something Moon had been wondering himself. “Are there other deserted colonies?”

Blossom’s expression was bleak. “There must be, but all of them would be claimed by their original courts. Just like this tree still belonged to us, even though we hadn’t been back here in generations. If we take someone else’s colony and territory, even if it’s unused, it leaves us vulnerable to challenges by other courts. We’d have to leave the Reaches completely. That’s a long trip, when we don’t know where we’re going.”

Moon had no answers. There were more than enough Arbora working and he didn’t want to just stand here and watch. He jumped over the side, flew back up to the knothole entrance, and took the winding passage into the greeting hall. Several soldiers were still there on guard, a considerably more glum group than they had been that morning. One looked up, a dark green Arbora with a heavy build, and Moon recognized him. It was Grain, one of the soldiers who had ordered Moon out of the old colony on his first day there.

If Grain remembered the incident, Moon couldn’t tell; he looked just as depressed as Blossom. He told Moon, “They’re all down in the big room below the teachers’ level, reading.”

Moon twitched his tail in acknowledgement and headed for the stairs. “Big room below the teachers’ level” actually took in a lot of territory, but he found them in the room they had been using to sort the unloaded supplies from the ships. It was round, with several passages leading away or up into the bowers, and the domed ceiling was a carving of the sky, with the sun’s rays stretching out to give way to stars, then the half-moon. Light-shells ringed the room, set just below the rim of the carving.

All the mentors and several teachers sat around on the floor, reading from loosely bound books or piles of loose parchment. Jade sat near Flower and Merit and Chime, paging through a thick book.

Moon shifted to groundling, because everybody else was, and Jade was in her Arbora form. He went to sit next to her, and she put an arm around his waist to tug him against her side. He leaned against her, and rubbed his cheek against hers. She said, “Was it a good hunt?”

“It was great,” he said absently, distracted by the book. The paper was a thick, soft parchment, the binding a silvery cord as thin as wire,

the covers a soft blue reptile hide. The writing was absolutely incomprehensible. It looked like a solid block of serpentine scrawl, ornamented in places with colored inks. He hoped he was looking at some sort of decorative embellishment, until Jade turned the page and hope sank. He snuck a look at the books and papers that Flower and Chime and the others were examining. No, this was actually the writing.

He could read Altanic and Kedaic well, and pick out words in several other common groundling languages, but this was a complete mystery. He assumed this was written Raksuran, but he couldn't even tell where one character ended and another began. He had had the vague idea that there might be a book about consorts, something that would give him some idea of how to behave, what was expected of him, or at least a better frame of reference. That was out; there probably was something like that, but it wasn't going to be written in Altanic.

He hesitated, but asked, "Did you find anything yet?" If they asked him to help, he wasn't sure what he was going to say. He would have to admit it eventually and ask someone to teach him, but he would rather not do it just yet. He didn't want to give River and his cronies anymore ammunition to use against him just now, not with the court so unsettled.

"I think we finally found where we need to be looking," Jade said, her voice dry. "That's an improvement."

Chime stirred, rubbing the back of his neck. "We started with the oldest records first, but those all seemed to be from the time Indigo and Cloud led the court away."

Flower nodded, not looking up from her book. "It looks like the paper they used started to fall apart, and they had to re-copy most of the old volumes. They were in too much of a hurry to bind most of it. So we can't go by age of the cover to tell the date. We just have to read until something indicates it."

From what Moon could tell, she had continued to read the entire time she was speaking. Being a mentor was apparently even more complicated than it had seemed at first glance.

Merit turned a page, yawning. "At least we found out that when the court originally left, there was no mention of anything being wrong with the tree."

"Stone already said that," Heart pointed out.

Merit shrugged. "I know, but at least if he hadn't been here to tell

us we would have found it out anyway.”

Heart frowned at him. “Could you make less sense? I almost understood that.”

“Argue later, read now,” Flower said, a growl in her voice.

Moon waited until they were all deeply engrossed in the books again, then slipped away.

He stopped at the nurseries to visit the kids, trying to forget the court’s troubles while the Sky Copper royals played mock-fight with some of the young fledgling warriors, and the baby Arbora climbed on him.

Spring came to sit next to Moon, and said, without preamble, “Copper says we can’t stay here.” She was a gawky, half-sized warrior; she and her clutchmate Snow were the oldest warrior fledglings, the only survivors of the old sister-queen Amber’s last clutch.

Moon eyed her over the head of the Arbora toddler who had clamped herself to his chest. It was either Pebble or Speckle, he couldn’t tell them apart yet; even their scent was identical. “Who’s Copper?”

Snow, who was shy, edged up behind Spring and supplied, “He thinks he’s smart, because Flower says he’ll be a mentor when he grows up.”

Moon ruffled Pebble or Speckle’s head frills, trying to think how much to say. The little queen Frost had switched sides at some point in the mock-battle and had pinned Thorn to the floor; she stopped to listen, and so did the rest of the combatants. Bitter, perched on Frost’s back, watched Moon with wide eyes. Three teachers, busy feeding baby Arbora, also looked over this way, worried and curious.

Moon let out his breath, resigned to being the bearer of this news. “We don’t know yet. But we might.”

He was braced to have to explain the theft of the seed, and just hoped he could do it in a way that wouldn’t make them all feel that the tree might be invaded at any moment. But Frost just said, “On the flying boats?”

Moon admitted this would probably be the case. Then Thorn flung the distracted Frost off him, Bitter pounced, and the game resumed.

Snow bounded off to join the other fledglings, but Spring said, “They don’t understand.”

Moon thought Frost, Bitter, and Thorn probably did understand,

but compared to what they had been through, moving again just wasn't a daunting prospect. The others were still unsettled by the Fell attack, and most seemed to be just pretending it hadn't happened. Spring was old enough to realize all the implications of their situation, and maybe starting to feel the weight of the responsibility she would have soon, as a female warrior from a queen's clutch. He tried, "We survived the Fell, we'll survive this."

It worked better on Spring than it had on Bone. She sat up a little straighter and said, "We will."



Later Moon went back to the teachers' hall, but found that in a frenzy of organization, the Arbora had moved everyone into newly-cleaned bowers. He found the one Jade had been moved into, a good-sized room on the far side of the nurseries, with a balcony looking out onto the stairwell and an intricately carved ceiling. Furs and cushions had been arranged on the floor for seating areas, there were warming stones in the hearth basin, and the blankets were piled into the big hanging bed. Moon found his fur blanket on top and took that as a good sign that he was living here too. He slung himself up into the bed for a nap.

Jade woke him sometime later, climbing atop him for sex before he had a chance to ask how things were going with the books. Afterward, she fell asleep, and he lay there stroking the frills along her back, thinking of how much he wanted to live here with her. He would live anywhere with her, but here was his first choice.

He drifted off again, and next time woke to Merit knocking on the bottom of the bed. "Jade? Flower says she found something."



They gathered in the teachers' hall, under the branches of the carved glade. Stone had reappeared, aborting the argument about who would go and get him. Vine brought Pearl, River, Drift, and a few other Aeriats back from wherever they had been. Chime, Bone, Knell, and Bell were here, but none of the others had been summoned. Everyone seemed to intend to wait until they had a coherent plan before calling everyone else together to hear it. Though given the speed with which news spread among the Arbora, calling a meeting of the entire court probably wouldn't be necessary.

While everyone found a place and sat down, Flower settled in the center of the group. She had a roll of paper in her lap, its painted leather case lying nearby. "We found a mentor's journal that speaks of

the seeds. Unfortunately it doesn't speak of what to do when a colony tree loses its seed. I suspect we may be the first court to ever have this problem, at least as far as our ancestors knew."

Jade snorted in bitter amusement. "Why does that not surprise me." Moon had been thinking the same thing.

Pearl spared her a glare, and prompted Flower, "Then what does it say?"

"It says how the seeds are made." Flower tapped the roll of paper in her lap. "They're taken from the heart of a mountain-thorn, a very rare plant that grows only in these western Reaches. This tree was seeded from a mountain-thorn about four to five days of warriors' flight from here, which is occupied by the court of Emerald Twilight. Or it used to be occupied by it, when this was written."

"They're still there." Stone's expression was at its most opaque. He didn't seem to find this news as encouraging as everyone else did. "I saw their scouts when I was here two turns ago. They're the oldest court in this reach, and the largest."

Jade leaned forward, her expression intent. "So we can ask them for another seed?"

Flower nodded. "I think it's our best hope. Of course we don't know if there are any to spare, but we can certainly ask."

Everyone looked at Pearl. She twitched her tail angrily. "I suppose it'll have to be a formal embassy." She said this as if it was a terrible thing to contemplate.

Moon looked at Jade, whose expression was more disgruntled than grim. No one else seemed taken aback by the idea of a formal embassy either. Apparently Pearl just didn't like other Raksura. *At least it's not just me*, he thought.

"We'll have to go begging to them," Pearl added, her tail flick turning into a full-out lash. Her warriors sidled away a little, out of immediate hitting range.

Jade told her, "I'll go. If you go, it will look like begging."

Pearl eyed her angrily. "You've never greeted another queen before, not as an embassy. You never even went to Wind Sun."

Jade bristled. "I would have, if I'd been given the chance." She looked away for a moment, clearly gathering her patience. "It's a good time for me to learn."

Pearl was obviously torn between not wanting to give Jade an important responsibility, and hating the idea of going herself. She

finally said, "Fine, then. You'll leave tomorrow."

Moon felt the tension in Jade's body relax, and he took a breath of relief himself. They had a plan, a chance, or at least a way to get more information, and Pearl wasn't going to be difficult about it. Or no more difficult than she normally was, anyway.

Then Stone cleared his throat. Pearl regarded him steadily for a moment. "What?"

He said, "Indigo Cloud doesn't have an alliance with Emerald Twilight."

Pearl dismissed it. "We'll offer alliance. They have no reason not to accept."

Moon managed to keep his expression blank. Emerald Twilight had no reason not to accept because Pearl hadn't been here to antagonize them, the way she had Wind Sun, the court that had refused to help fight the Fell.

Stone scratched his neck, and added thoughtfully, "We almost went to war with Emerald Twilight, before Indigo Cloud left the Reaches."

There was a startled murmur from everyone. "War?" Flower repeated, incredulous.

"Are you serious?" Jade demanded.

Pearl lifted her spines. "Was it something you did? Just tell us."

Stone glared at her. "I was barely ten turns old." Under Jade and Pearl's concentrated stares, he admitted, "Indigo stole Cloud from a daughter queen at Emerald Twilight. I forget her name."

"Stole?" It was Moon's turn to stare. "What... how... That can happen?"

"We can only hope," River put in, nastily. Drift snickered.

Moon met River's gaze in deliberate challenge. "Do you need another beating?"

"Quiet, both of you," Pearl snapped. She turned back to Stone. "Was Cloud taken?"

"Yes. The daughter queen took him when he was too young, and after a few turns, it wasn't working out. There was no clutch yet." Stone shrugged. "At least that's our side of the story. I have no idea if that's actually true or not."

Bone shook his head, affronted. "Is this even in the histories?"

Flower groaned and rubbed her eyes. “I’ve never seen it there. And I’m fairly certain I’d remember.”

This sounded serious. Nobody seemed to think that maybe Emerald Twilight would have forgotten the incident by now. Moon wasn’t even sure what they meant by “stolen.” *Kidnapped, carried off? Like the Fell did with the Arbora?* He didn’t need anything new to worry about.

Jade tapped her claws on the floor, impatient. “How did it happen?”

Stone said, “This was when Indigo was still a sister queen—when her mother Cerise was still alive—and she was visiting Emerald Twilight. She saw Cloud and just... grabbed him. Half the queens in the Reaches got together to settle it to prevent a war, and by that time Indigo had talked Cloud into accepting her and repudiating his first queen. The other queens talked Emerald Twilight into letting it go.” He spread his hands. “It was a successful match. Indigo succeeded as reigning queen, the court renamed itself after her and Cloud, and they led us to a new colony when this one started to fail. They had eight clutches. But I have no idea how Emerald Twilight sees it.”

Everyone was silent as they digested that. Bell and Knell exchanged an uneasy glance. Bone growled under his breath, sounding disgruntled.

Chime cleared his throat. He said tentatively, “Maybe this would be a good time to revisit the discussion about changing the court’s name?”

Everyone ignored him. Jade asked Stone, “If we had to search for another colony, where would we go?”

Stone’s expression wasn’t encouraging. “If we stay in the Reaches, we’d have to find an unclaimed territory and build one ourselves. That means no solid shelter for the rain seasons, no prepared ground for gardens.” Her voice quiet, Flower said, “I’m afraid to think how many of the wounded and the aged wouldn’t survive that.”

Chime hunched his shoulders, as if shuddering at the thought. “We’ve had too many illnesses in the last twenty turns. I know it was the Fell influence on the old colony, but if we have another outbreak of lung disease...”

Moon could imagine it all too readily. He had seen enough failing groundling camps to know what could happen. A fire, a flood, a bad crop year, a disease that took too many for the group to recover. Small settlements were vulnerable, especially when forced to migrate.

Stone didn't acknowledge their comments, and just continued, "If we go back outside or into the Fringes... I'd have to scout for a ruin to settle in."

"And hope you could find one before this tree collapses on us," Knell said.

Pearl told Jade, "We'll try Emerald Twilight first. You'll just have to go anyway and hope that... Just hope."

Jade nodded, for once in complete accord with Pearl. "I will."

The talk turned to who would go, and exactly what a formal embassy should consist of. Apparently five warriors was the right number for a formal greeting, and everyone thought that the addition of Stone and Flower would show how serious their errand was. Also, Jade admitted, it might make Emerald Twilight think twice if they were inclined to be difficult and refuse the greeting. It was a much more serious breach of etiquette to ignore a line-grandfather and an elderly Arbora mentor.

"It takes away their choice to refuse," Pearl explained, still cranky even though she wasn't going. "Be aware that that alone may make them angry."

It was a good point, but Moon didn't think it mattered. If the other court was inclined to be angry, everything they did or didn't do was just going to make it worse. He was going to say so, when Pearl added, "And you'll need a consort with you. Moon will have to go along." Her tone made it clear she didn't enjoy this prospect at all.

Startled, Moon looked at the others, expecting an argument. Instead, everyone just nodded agreement. Some of it was reluctant agreement, but no one protested. Jade said, "But is he recovered well enough for a long flight?"

Flower said, "He should be. He's young, and his injuries healed well. And I'll be there if he has any trouble."

It wasn't his injury that Moon was worried about. "Are we sure that's a good idea?" He wanted to go, to see the mountain-thorn if for no other reason, but the etiquette of the formal visit sounded fraught with complication. There were so many nuances he didn't understand, even here. He didn't think he was ready for a big busy court yet. "Stone's already going."

Flower explained, "Stone is a line-grandfather. And they'll expect Jade, as a sister queen, to bring her own consort. A sister queen and a consort are essential for a first-time meeting with a court of Emerald Twilight's stature."

With a grim expression, Knell said, "And when they ask what court he's from, what are you going to say?"

And here was yet another nuance Moon didn't understand. As far as he knew, he was from this court. "What do you mean?"

Jade answered, "It's going to be a formal embassy. If we introduce you, we have to give your lineage."

"Oh." That was going to be awkward. He didn't want to have to explain himself or prove that he wasn't a crazy solitary every time they met someone new. "Can't we just make one up?"

Jade gave him an exasperated look. "No."

He thought it was the best solution. "You could say I came from Sky Copper." The only survivors of the destroyed court were Frost, Thorn, and Bitter, and they could probably be coached to confirm the story if it was ever necessary.

Stone looked intrigued at the suggestion, but Jade said, "Moon, no."

There was an uneasy silence.

Stone said, "So it's going to be, 'This is Moon, we won't say where he came from so you can assume he's a feral solitary.'"

Jade gave him a sour look. "How about, 'and this is Stone, our cranky line-grandfather that we dragged along so he could start fights with everyone.'"

Grimly determined, Pearl told Moon, "You'll have to tell them the truth. Just don't embarrass us."

Moon suppressed an irritated hiss. "I've walked into strange camps and settlements all my life. I know how to act." But even as he said it, he knew he would probably eat those words.

□

Later, Moon and Jade sat outside on the edge of the knothole, watching the fall of night under the mountain-trees. The light had turned a deep green-gold, gradually fading as the sun set somewhere past the trees. A little flurry of tiny yellow flying things played in the spray of the waterfall. When one strayed close enough, Moon realized they were flying frogs, something he hadn't seen before. On one of the platforms about a hundred paces below, a group of Arbora still explored the beds of the old gardens, searching for buried roots. A few young warriors flew around under the upper branches, looping and diving in play.

Her voice tight, Jade said, "I hope we can stay here."

It had to be what everyone was thinking tonight. Stone hadn't promised them anything, and this place had been more than any of them had expected. Moon leaned against her shoulder and said, "That was good, when you got Pearl to send you to Emerald Twilight instead of going herself."

Jade's spines rippled in a shrug. "It's not as if she wanted to go. She hates talking to other queens." She added, "I think we'll take Vine with us. Pearl trusts him, and taking him will make us look more united to the rest of the court."

Moon thought it was a little late for that. No one in the court with any sense could possibly have missed the tension between the two queens. But he didn't have any real objection to Vine. "What about Balm? She's done this before." Balm had gone to Wind Sun with Vine in an unsuccessful attempt to ask the other court for help.

"I want her to come. We need a female warrior to speak for us when we arrive. Floret's the only other one who's spoken to other courts before, and she's close to Pearl." Jade stirred uneasily. "But I've tried to talk to Balm, and it didn't go well. It was hard on the boats. There was nowhere private, and she wouldn't fly off anywhere with me."

It might be that Balm just didn't want to talk about what the Fell had done to her, not yet. Moon could understand that at a bone-deep level. "Tell her you need her help. Tell her it's her duty."

"It'll make her feel guilty."

"She already feels guilty." It might as well be used for a good purpose.

Jade thought about it a moment more, then nodded. "It can't hurt to ask. I'll go find her."

Jade went inside, and Moon sat there a while longer, watching the light fail. He was about to go in when a green warrior swooped down from above, cupping his wings to land on a narrow ledge just below the lip of the knothole. It was River.

Moon leaned back and propped himself on his arms, deliberately casual. "Here for that beating?" He really hoped so.

Sounding amused, River said, "You should be afraid of this trip, solitary. This will be a big court, with lots of consorts to spare."

Moon didn't show his sudden sense of unease. "So."

River climbed a little closer, gripping the bark with his claws.

“Jade’s never been near an adult consort she wasn’t related to. All the ones at the courts near us were taken already, or too young. Why do you think she settled for you?”

Moon shoved forward and shifted in a blur of movement. But River fell backward off the ledge and twisted into a dive through the spray of the waterfall.

Moon stopped, trying to settle his spines. Chasing River was no good. It wasn’t as if he could kill him when he caught him. It would upset the others too much.

The words stung because they were true. By the time Jade had grown to adulthood, Pearl had driven off the consorts who had been born to Amber, her sister queen, sending them to other courts. The other consorts had died of illness, or been killed in fighting off attacks on the colony.

Stone had said Azure had chosen him out of the lot, but Jade hadn’t had a choice. It had been Moon or nobody, and the court had been reluctant to move without a consort for her.

He knew Jade wanted him now, but his position in Indigo Cloud had been far more secure when he was the only available consort in flying distance. He knew queens could take more than one consort, and have warrior and Arbora lovers, but that wouldn’t affect his place in the court. And he had thought that as long as he was with Jade, he could handle it. He hadn’t counted on the members of the court who weren’t happy with an ex-feral solitary as first consort having the opportunity to pressure Jade to replace him.

Moon turned and went back to the passage, taking it through to the greeting hall, snarling under his breath. Now he had yet another reason to be uneasy about this trip.

Chapter Five

They left at dawn the next morning, flying under the canopy through the suspended forest. Traveling as fast as they could, Moon and Jade could have made the trip in three days rather than

five. Stone could fly much faster than that, even carrying Flower, but all three kept to the warriors' pace. Everyone agreed that showing up at a strange court, especially one that had no reason to be friendly, without the warriors necessary for the formal greeting would waste more time than it would save. It would give Emerald Twilight's queens an excuse to delay speaking to them, or to refuse to see them at all. Moon had already gotten the idea that Raksuran courts saw no inherent reason to be nice to each other; this was just more proof that alliances between courts, let alone friendly relationships, had to be carefully managed.

The warriors they brought were Chime, Balm, Vine, Floret, and Song. Chime had spent little time outside the colony compared to the others, but after flying to the Golden Isles and chasing kethel across desert plains to a Dwei Hive, he wasn't much daunted by a trip to visit another court. Vine and Floret were Pearl's choices. Vine had visited other courts before, and he was easier to deal with than many of the warriors she might have picked. Moon didn't know Floret well. In groundling form, she had the copper skin and red-brown hair that was common in Indigo Cloud to both Aeriad and Arbora, and she seemed to get along with the others. Song was young, but Jade trusted her and she had visited Sky Copper when it was Indigo Cloud's closest ally. Moon had always thought her groundling form looked enough like Balm's for the two to be related; they both had warm, dark skin and curling, honey-colored hair.

Moon wasn't sure how Jade's talk with Balm had gone, but Balm had shown up in the greeting hall before dawn, ready to leave. She was tense and quiet whenever they landed to rest, but at least Chime and Song were treating her as they always had, as if nothing had ever happened. Hopefully that would help her feel more at ease.

Just before dawn, when they were nearly ready to leave, Moon had gone down to the nurseries to see Bitter, Thorn, and Frost. Most of the younger kids were still asleep or just stirring, so Bark had shooed them into one of the smaller rooms off the main area so they could talk without disturbing the others. Moon had told them he was going to be away for a while, and why. Considering how unconcerned they

had been about the possibility of leaving the colony tree, he thought they would take it well. He was wrong.

Thorn huddled in a bristling unhappy heap, refusing to shift to groundling, and Bitter just stared at Moon with big hopeless eyes. Frost threw an actual fit, flared her wings, and snarled that he had no right to go and railed against Jade for taking him.

“Frost, stop.” Moon had seen groundlings spank their young before and had no idea how that would work with a Raksuran fledgling queen. But he was ready to give it a try.

That must have shown in his expression, because Frost stopped in mid-word, eyed him a moment, and settled into a sulk. She said, “We don’t want you to go. Who’ll take care of us?”

“Bell and Bark and the other Arbora.” Moon hadn’t been taking care of them anyway, not the way the teachers were, with all the real work of feeding, bathing, and making them behave. On the boat, while his back and shoulder healed, he hadn’t been able to do much of anything except watch them play.

“They can’t fight like you can,” Thorn said, his voice deeper and raspier in his other form.

“Pearl will be here.” Pearl might be moody and pessimistic, but she could rip a Fell ruler apart like a straw doll and wouldn’t hesitate when it came to physically defending the court.

Bitter leaned over to Thorn and whispered inaudibly. Thorn translated, “Bitter says we want you.”

That one went right to the heart and Moon winced. He wasn’t even sure why they felt that way about him. He had barely gotten them out of the Dwei hive before Ranea had caught him. It had been Jade and Pearl who had saved them all. But he had been the first Raksura they had seen since the destruction of Sky Copper, the death of everyone they knew, the end of their world. “I have to go. But when I come back, I’ll teach you all how to hunt.”

Bitter blinked. Thorn’s spines flicked and the two exchanged a look. Frost’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. She said, “Bitter can’t fly yet. He’s too small.”

Sorrow had started teaching Moon to hunt when he was barely big enough to leap from branch to branch, a precaution that had allowed him to survive after she was killed. “He can still learn.”

Frost had considered that, consulted with the two consorts, then finally agreed, grudgingly. “All right. But don’t be away long.”

Moon managed not to let her maneuver him into any promises as to how soon he would be back.



The scenery made the journey pass quickly. The variety of grasseaters and predators living on the platforms of the mountain-trees seemed endless; Moon saw tree frogs nearly as big as he was, mottled gray-green to blend into the bark, clinging to the broad branches and thoughtfully watching the Raksura fly past. And the trees themselves often took on fantastic shapes. They passed one that was covered with giant gray nodules, each as big around as the *Valendera*, and another that was hung with curtains of moss, thousands of paces long, draped like fabric. They had no difficulty finding the way; Raksura always knew which direction was south, an ability which Chime had described as a natural pull toward the heart point of the Three Worlds.

Moon's bad shoulder was sore after the first full day of flying, but the discomfort lessened every day, and he could feel the muscles stretching and getting strong again. He thought he was healing faster flying than he would have just sitting around the colony.

They stopped to rest and sleep on the platforms or the wide branches of the mountain-trees. As Moon had noticed when they crossed the grass plains together, Stone's presence seemed to drive off predators, even when he was in his groundling form, and he had the same effect here.

They slept one night in a hollowed out space on a branch, and Moon woke to hear the dry rustle of something big slithering away. He sat up, out of the warm pile of the others, to see the dark outlines of Song keeping watch at the top of the hollow and Stone sitting next to her. Song crouched down a little, but hadn't hissed an alarm. Stone must have heard Moon move, because he shook his head slightly, telling him it was all right.

From where he was huddled behind Moon, Chime whispered nervously, "What is it?"

"Nothing," Moon whispered back, and lay down again.

They had eaten heavily before they left the colony, but long days of flying made them hungry, so they stopped briefly to hunt as they went along. On the fourth day, Moon sat out the hunt with Stone, Jade, and Flower, watching from an upper branch as the warriors stalked a big wooly grasseater on one of the platforms below. Stone had said they were close enough to Emerald Twilight that scouts might be watching. It brought home the fact that Jade might not care

much about Moon's unconsortlike behavior, but another court would.

Jade had told him as much as she could about what to expect, but Moon could make all kinds of mistakes, most without even knowing he was making them. *This could go very badly wrong, and it could be my fault.* It wasn't a pleasant thought.



On the afternoon of the fifth day, they flew into an open area under the forest canopy, and got their first glimpse of Emerald Twilight's mountain-thorn.

Thorn-covered branches as big around as the flying boats wound out and up to form a giant globe. The branches were wreathed with vines and flowers, and so large the smaller trees of the suspended forest had taken root on many of them. A trio of warriors flew across the clearing, banking close enough to see the newcomers, but not to bar their path.

Fortunately Stone seemed to know how to approach the colony. He flew unerringly toward a big wreath of vines that turned out to be marking a sizable gap in the thorns. Stone slowed further, and they followed him through the green tunnel.

Once inside they could see the central trunk of the thorn, bristling with branches and platforms, some formed naturally on the nested branches but many others constructed. There was a big one, near the center of the trunk, that had to mark the main entrance. More warriors flew around in this interior space, and Arbora were out on the platforms, working in the gardens or stopping to watch the visitors' arrival. This court was obviously much larger than Indigo Cloud.

They landed on the big platform, and Stone set Flower down. Moon folded his wings and managed to shift to groundling in time with the others. Only Jade stayed in her winged form. The arch of thornvines and leaves high overhead dappled the sunlight, and the air was scented with flowers. There was a narrow waterfall in the carved trunk, the flow controlled by small platforms somehow fixed at intervals down the tree's wall, each forming a little pond stocked with flowering water plants.

Chime leaned over to whisper to Moon, "We should do that in our tree. If we can stay in our tree, I mean."

Moon nodded, feeling overwhelmed. Again. The others were trying to look as if none of this was the least bit impressive, though Stone was the only one who managed it convincingly. Jade kept her

expression blank, but Moon could read the tension in her shoulders and spines.

Arbora stood on the surrounding platforms, and Aeriati perched up in the branches, all watching them. Before it got more uncomfortable, a warrior dropped down from an upper balcony, cupping her wings to land lightly. She shifted to groundling, turning into a tall slim woman with dark bronze skin, and dark hair that was just beginning to lighten with age. Her sleeveless tunic and skirt were silky blue, trimmed with tiny silver-gray pearls.

Moon was suddenly glad they had taken the time to bathe in a stream and change clothes this morning. The warriors were dressed in the fine weaving of the Arbora, shirts over loose trousers, in soft blues and greens, dark rich browns, and Flower wore a dark blue robe. Moon's clothes were black, except for the sash over his knife belt, which was shot through with red. Jade wore a belt, pectoral, bracelets, and armbands of silver with dark blue stones and deep-water pearls. Stone looked like he always did, having made absolutely no concession to their hosts but then, as a line-grandfather, he didn't have to.

Looking around at the Emerald Twilight Arbora and warriors, Moon suspected they were still going to seem poor compared to these people, but at least they were clean. The warrior said, "I'm Willow, of Emerald Twilight."

It was normal for female warriors to greet strangers, and it had to be a good sign that one had come forward so readily. If Emerald Twilight had really wanted to be rude, the warriors could have simply ignored them. *At least they're open to visitors*, Moon thought. Maybe this wouldn't be too difficult.

Balm stepped forward to answer her. "I'm Balm, of Indigo Cloud. Our sister queen has come to greet your queen."

"Indigo Cloud?" Willow lifted her brows, startled. There was a stir from the watching Arbora and Aeriati, a wary flutter.

Damn it, Moon thought, biting his lip to control his expression. It didn't appear Emerald Twilight had forgotten Indigo Cloud, even after all these turns.

"Yes." Balm, with commendable self-possession, managed to look as if she thought the reaction was surprise due to hearing that a new court had arrived in the Reaches. "We've recently returned to our old colony, some five days flight from here."

"Oh." Willow hesitated, then seemed to decide that pretending

ignorance of any past history between the courts was best for the moment. "Come into our greeting hall."

They followed her across the platform, through an arbor and a short tunnel into the trunk. The hall was a round high-ceilinged cavern, but it wasn't as impressive in size as the one at Indigo Cloud; the central well only went up six levels, with balconies looking down. It was softly lit and vines grew all around the balcony railings, the flowers purple, white, and blue. There was a shallow pool in the center, the bottom inlaid with polished white stones. It took Moon a moment to realize where the light was coming from. It wasn't the stones or shells or moss, it was the flowers.

On this level, three tall archways led off into the depths of the trunk. A queen walked out of the center one, still in her winged form, her light blue scales webbed with gold. Trained by several warriors, she crossed toward them to stand in front of Jade. The two queens stared at each other for a moment and Moon found himself holding his breath. Then both shifted to Arbora.

Behind him, Moon heard Chime sigh with relief. Being acknowledged by a sister queen was the second big obstacle and it seemed they might get past it.

The new queen said, "Tempest, sister queen of Emerald Twilight."

"Jade, sister queen of Indigo Cloud." She inclined her head toward Stone and Flower. "Our line-grandfather, Stone. And Flower, who is a mentor, and our elder of Arbora."

"We're honored." Then Tempest looked at Moon. He kept his expression neutral, though he felt a flush creep up the back of his neck. Her glance seemed critical, which made it harder to bear. He had never seen another adult consort except for Stone, who was apparently not the best example, so he had no idea if he looked like he was supposed to or not.

Jade and Flower had explained that young consorts were only introduced to courts that were friends or allies. Since they had brought him, it was a sign that Indigo Cloud wanted to be friends, but the formalities would have to be gotten through first. Flower had also indicated that Emerald Twilight might possibly attempt to thwart that process by trying to skip the formalities, just to put Indigo Cloud in a weaker position. One way to do that was to try to provoke them to introduce Moon before it was time. It was all just as hideously complicated as he had feared. He knew he was going to fumble the etiquette at some point. He just wanted to get it over with.

He had been lucky when he had been brought to Indigo Cloud by

Stone. There was no etiquette for solitaires, even if they were consorts.

After a moment that stretched Moon's nerves even further, Tempest gave in, and turned deliberately back to Jade. "We were aware another court had arrived in the Reaches. Our scouts reported that you came here in a strange way." She managed to convey the fact that she was bringing up a delicate subject. She had to mean the flying boats.

Jade said, easily, "We had wounded, and the wind-ships were the best way to move them. We fought the Fell at our old colony. We defeated them, but..." She flicked her spines in a slight shrug. "It was impossible to remain there."

Tempest tilted her head, suddenly genuinely interested. "The Fell attacked you?"

"We're a small court. Our colony was vulnerable." Jade's face tightened, as if it cost her something to make that admission to another queen. "They destroyed our closest ally, Sky Copper, a small court in the grass plains to the east. Then they attacked us." She hesitated, exchanged a glance with Flower, then continued, "This Fell flight had a scheme for interbreeding with Raksura. Apparently they had been carrying it out for some time."

The Emerald Twilight warriors stared, openly appalled. Tempest dropped her formal pose, leaned forward, and said in shock, "How? I mean— Is that even possible?"

Jade tilted her head to Flower, who said dryly, "It caught us by surprise, too."

Tempest and the others listened intently as Flower told the brief version of the story, of the Fell attack on the colony, the crossbreed mentordakti and their powers, the pursuit to the Dwei hive, and the crossbreed queen, Ranea. Flower left out any mention of how Moon had actually come to Indigo Cloud, and said only that the Fell poison had come from a groundling tribe in the far east. She did say that he had been badly wounded by the Fell after freeing the Arbora captives. Moon saw Tempest glance at him again, this time with a trace of sympathy. She was probably thinking, *So that's what's wrong with him.*

Then Flower pressed a hand to her lower back and winced. Jade said, in mild reproach, "We've come a long way."

Tempest flicked her spines in annoyance. Moon thought they had just scored a point, either because Tempest had been lured into a breach of etiquette by keeping them standing out here, or that she had

treated them like people by engaging in a real conversation, and now had to either continue it or be deliberately rude. Whichever it was, Tempest said, not too grudgingly, “Come into our queens’ hall. The others can wait over here, and be comfortable.”

That was what they had been hoping for. Tempest led Jade, Flower, and Stone on through the big archway, and Willow took Moon and the others over to the side of the hall, furnished with cushions and a little metal brazier shaped like a berryvine leaf. They dropped their packs and took seats, and Willow retreated a short distance, politely out of earshot.

Aeriat and a few Arbora, all mostly in groundling form, wandered through the hall, or appeared briefly on the balconies above to snatch curious glances. Moon felt the pressure of their stares, and forced himself not to twitch nervously. He had always hated being stared at; in most of the places he had traveled, being singled out for curiosity was never a good thing.

“The warriors aren’t coming to talk to us,” Floret said. She folded her arms and looked uncomfortable. “They did when we visited at Sky Copper.”

“Yes, but we’d known them for turns and turns,” Balm told her. She sounded more like her old self. Being out of the colony and having something important to do was obviously good for her. “We’ve just met these people.”

Song looked around, trying to be casual about it. “So you don’t think we’ll be invited to eat with the Arbora?”

“Be patient.” The taller Vine dropped an arm around Floret’s neck. “They haven’t even gotten through the queens’ greeting yet. It’s going to be a while.”

Then Balm murmured, “What’s this? The queens should all be inside.” Moon turned to look.

Another queen glided down from an upper balcony to land in the hall. Her scales were silver-gray, with a web-tracery of brilliant green. Moon expected to see her turn down one of the passages, but instead she furred her wings and started toward them.

Her pace was deliberate and she lashed her tail lazily. Sounding bewildered, Song whispered, “What is she doing?” Vine and Chime shushed her. The queen had the attention of the whole hall, everyone staring. At least the Raksura who lived here seemed to be just as taken aback by this as they were. Willow actually looked alarmed.

The queen came closer, focusing on Moon and ignoring the

others. She stopped only a pace away, her gaze a threat and a challenge. Moon's shoulders tensed, his back itching to lift spines he didn't have at the moment. Then she said, "What a pretty thing. I'm surprised your queen leaves you unguarded."

Moon pushed to his feet, the movement slow and deliberate. She was a little shorter than him, which meant she was younger than Jade. He said, "Maybe she thought this was a civilized place." Behind him he heard a startled snort, possibly from Floret.

Surprised, the queen lifted her spines sharply. He realized she had expected him to be too intimidated to respond. Compared to Pearl, she just wasn't that intimidating. She snarled, "This is a civilized place. But if you're foolish enough to challenge me, don't think I'll spare you."

Behind him, the others stood now. They had the attention of the entire nervously silent hall. It occurred to Moon belatedly that he should have ignored the queen. He hadn't been introduced yet and no one from Emerald Twilight was supposed to be talking to him, so the breach of etiquette would have been all on her side. It was too late now. He tilted his head. "If you want to fight, then attack me." As a queen she could keep him from shifting, or at least try to, but if she fell on him while he was trapped in groundling form he doubted it would reflect well on Emerald Twilight.

She leaned toward him and hissed in fury. "If I thought you were serious—"

A dark shape dropped from an upper balcony, and landed lightly on the floor just a few paces away. The queen flinched back from Moon, and the others twitched away, startled. Song shifted to her winged form, then shifted back when Balm hissed at her. Moon didn't move. The newcomer was another consort.

He was nearly half a head taller than Moon, his shoulders broader. His black scales gleamed in the soft light with a faint red undersheen, and his eyes were a dark, deep brown. He dropped his spines and folded his half-furled wings, his hard gaze never leaving the young queen. Then he shifted to groundling.

He had even, handsome features, dark bronze skin, and was lean but strongly built. He was dressed in dark clothes and wore a gold band around his upper arm, over the silken material of his shirt, that was studded with polished red stones. Small gold hoops pierced his ears, all the way up the curves. He tilted his head at the queen and said, dryly, "Ash. What are you doing?"

She flared her spines. "Since when do you greet unwanted

guests?”

He didn't respond to that obvious attempt at distraction. "Must I speak to your mother of this?"

Ash hesitated, half-snarling, then turned abruptly away and strode out of the greeting hall toward the outer platform.

The consort turned to Moon, eyeing him thoughtfully. Then he stepped closer. It should have been threatening, but Moon had to still the impulse to lean toward him. There was something about him, that ability to draw you in, the same power that Pearl had. With the consort it was easier to resist, and Moon couldn't tell if he was doing it consciously or not. He touched Moon under the chin, a light pressure that made Moon lift his head slightly. It was a challenge, but Moon didn't growl, didn't twitch away. He might still know little about how Raksura behaved, but he knew this wasn't that kind of challenge.

Then the consort said, "You're feral."

Behind Moon, there was a startled stir, and somebody hissed, offended. Apparently it was fine for Indigo Cloud to say it, but no one else was allowed. Chime started to say, "He isn't. He's—"

The consort flicked a look at them, and they all went still. *I wish I could do that*, Moon thought, not taking his eyes off the other man. The way he had said it had been a statement of fact, not an accusation. And it seemed to mean something else besides the usual insult. Moon replied, "A little."

There was a brief glint in the other consort's eyes, possibly amusement, but it was hard to tell. He let Moon go and stepped back. "But you're taken?"

Consorts couldn't tell, couldn't scent the marker that queens left on the consorts they took for their own. Moon said, "By Jade, sister queen of Indigo Cloud. I'm Moon."

"She must be brave." He considered a moment, watching Moon intently. "Will you come sit with me?"

It might be a bad mistake. This was a game Moon didn't understand and he had already made a serious error, just sitting here. But he didn't want this man to walk away without him. "Yes."

The warriors exchanged glances, worried and confused, as if they would like to object but knew better. Chime stared urgently at Balm, and she stepped forward and said, "What do we tell his queen when she asks where he is?"

“Say he is with Shadow, first consort to Ice, the reigning queen.” Shadow shifted and leapt straight up to cling to the wall high above. Moon shifted and leapt after him.

They climbed all the way up to the fourth level, then Shadow slung himself up onto a balcony and shifted back to groundling. Moon followed, shifting as they started down the passage. Unlike the Indigo Cloud tree, the walls here weren’t solid wood, but were made of dark brown vines, woven together. It left gaps for air to pass through, and Moon could catch glimpses of the rooms and passages to either side.

He could also hear movement, the slight rustling of wings and spines, pacing them. There was a faint chance Shadow could be walking him into an ambush, but if so, the ambushers weren’t doing a good job of concealing their presence.

As they walked, Shadow asked, “Why did you leave your birthcourt?” That was an easy question, at least. “I didn’t. They all died, when I was too young to remember.”

Shadow’s brow creased in a wince, but he didn’t offer sympathy. “How did you survive at that age?”

“There were others at first, a female warrior and four younger Arbora.

Later they were killed, too.” He didn’t add that he had thought the warrior was his mother and the others his siblings, until Stone had told him that was impossible.

The passage wound around, then opened into a larger hall. It was an irregular shape, with sections curving off out of sight, lit by more of the spelled flowers. It took Moon a moment to realize those were bowers suspended from the ceiling, formed of large globes or half-shells of woven vines. They dripped rich fabrics in jewel-like colors, reds, golds, shimmering in the light. Seating cushions and furs were scattered on the floor below them. The place smelled of jasmine and Moon heard water running, somewhere out of sight.

A dark shape climbed across the ceiling, then clung with its claws to the vines and hung upside down to watch them pass: another consort. Faces peered out of some of the bowers, some of them shifted to Raksura before climbing out. The back of Moon’s neck itched with nerves. Everyone he saw was male, and when they shifted they had black scales. All consorts, and from the movement he could hear, there were a lot of them.

Moon had felt self-conscious plenty of times, but these were Raksura. They would be able to smell the sweat breaking out all over

his body.

Shadow led the way through the confusing space toward the outer wall of the trunk, ignoring the curious stares. A doorway there let in greentinted sunlight, and they went through and out to a broad open balcony.

It was protected by the arch of thorn vines and partly enclosed by the spreading canopies of smaller trees growing in the big branch just below. In a shallow pool lined with polished stone, tiny water-lizards skittered across and away at their approach.

Dark gray furs were spread near the pool. Shadow gestured for Moon to sit and settled across from him. Moon sat on the fur, trying to look calm, or at least neutral. From here he had a good view of the sculpture above the pool, where the whole side of the trunk had been turned into an elaborate carving. It was made up of small figures of Raksura, Aeriats and Arbora. They were all different, all picked out in delicate detail. Beneath the figures were rows of twisty writing, the same language he had seen in the mentors' books.

Watching him, Shadow said, "You have never seen this design before?"

"No. What does it say?"

He knew immediately it was a mistake. Shadow flicked a thoughtful sideways glance at him. "It's a myth, of how the Raksura came to be."

Intensely self-conscious, Moon managed not to twitch. He should have been able to read that for himself, obviously, even if he hadn't recognized the carving. *Idiot.*

Shadow continued, "It explains that in the beginning, the Aeriats were shifters so that they might hide among groundlings and deceive them."

"To kill them," Moon said. "I've heard that part before." *Just don't ask me where*, he thought. He wondered if the myth mentioned the connection between the Aeriats and the Fell or if it ignored that aspect, but he wasn't going to ask.

Shadow nodded. "And that the Aeriats came to these forest Reaches, to the mountain-trees, where they met another tribe of shifters, the Arbora. That in joining with them they changed their ways, and both became stronger."

Moon had heard that part too, but not quite phrased that way. "It happened here? In this forest?"

“That is what the legends say.”

A few other consorts drifted out onto the balcony, all in groundling form, watching curiously. Shadow glanced at them and apparently his expression made it clear that they weren't invited to get any closer; they kept their distance. They were all younger than Moon, with strong slender builds, dark hair, slightly pointed features. Two of them bore a strong resemblance to Shadow, with darker skin and broader shoulders. They all wore dark silky clothes, in deep blues or black, all wore jewelry, gold or silvery metals. Moon felt even more dirty and awkward than he had before, if that was possible. He was starting to get an inkling of the difference between what he was supposed to be and what he actually was, and it wasn't pleasant. Shadow turned back to him, and asked, “What was your birthcourt called?”

“I don't know.” It was clear Shadow probably wouldn't have taken any interest in Moon at all, except that he was curious to meet a solitary. “It was somewhere to the east.”

A young consort carried out a lacquered tray and set it between Moon and Shadow. It held two delicate green glazed cups, and a kettle ornamented with writhing serpentine forms. He poured out tea, then sat back, as if planning to stay. Shadow regarded him, lifting a brow. The younger consort held out for a moment, then stood and retreated with a reproachful hiss. Shadow picked up a cup and handed it to Moon. As if the interruption hadn't occurred, he said, “The other consorts at Indigo Cloud did not object to you?”

“Uh, no. Not really.” Moon waited until Shadow had lifted his own cup before he tasted the light yellow tea. Admitting that there were no other consorts except Stone and the fledglings would just suggest that Indigo Cloud was desperate and hadn't had a choice. It was true, but Moon didn't want to suggest it. “The line-grandfather found me and brought me to the court.”

Shadow turned his cup, as if admiring the glaze on the pottery. “So. Does Indigo Cloud visit only to make an alliance?”

This was the tricky part. Moon felt free to give information about himself, but he wasn't sure if he should say anything about their mission yet. It didn't help that he was fairly sure his dilemma was crystal clear to Shadow. Moon struggled for a moment, but he felt any attempt he made to avoid answering the question would be clumsy and probably unintentionally offensive. Feeling like he was jumping off a cliff without shifting, he said, “No. We need help. When we got to the Indigo Cloud colony tree, the seed was missing.”

“The seed?” Startled, Shadow listened as Moon took a lesson from Flower and told the story as briefly as possible, telling him about the damage to the tree, the dead groundlings near the outer door, and what little the Kek had seen. Shadow finally shook his head, saying, “These groundlings must have come from some distance. If they were native to these Reaches we, or the Kek, would have heard of them before. But then how did they know where the tree was, or that the seed was even there?”

“That’s what we thought. Our mentor thinks they wanted it for groundling magic.”

Shadow frowned as he thought it over. “It seems the only explanation.”

There was a faint commotion from the door into the consorts’ bowers, then Stone strolled out, as casually as if he had just happened to be in the area. The young consorts watched him warily as he crossed the balcony and took a seat near Moon and Shadow. Shadow greeted his arrival with a somewhat ironic nod. If he had said, *You’re here and I can’t do anything about it, so I might as well accept it*, it couldn’t have been any clearer. He said, “Are they talking yet?”

Stone regarded Shadow thoughtfully. “They’re getting there.”

“I told him about the seed,” Moon said, figuring if it was the wrong choice, they might as well get the consequences over with.

Apparently it wasn’t, because Stone just grunted an acknowledgment.

Shadow said, “I was just realizing how little I know about the seeds. No one has needed to create a new colony tree for uncounted turns, so there has been little reason to speak about them.”

Stone nodded. “Got any extras?”

“I’m sure we must have.”

□

They went further down inside the mountain-thorn’s trunk, a level or so below the consorts’ bowers, toward a chamber where Stone said the queens were gathered. Shadow stopped at the intersection of the passage that led to it, saying, “Go on. I must speak to Ice first.”

He took another doorway, and Moon and Stone started down the passage. Moon asked, low-voiced, “Is he going to help us?”

Stone shrugged. “He’s going to tell his queen what we told him. It all depends on her.” He added, apparently serious, “When we left you in the greeting hall, I thought this might happen.”

Moon threw him an exasperated look. "You did not."

The way opened into a big round chamber and, like the upper passages, the walls were closely woven branches, allowing air and light to pass through. The floor was made of squares of different woods, all smoothed and polished to show the grain. It didn't seem elaborate enough for this court, until Moon glanced up. Between the two wells that opened into the domed roof hung a giant circular sculpture of queens in midair battle. It wasn't a particularly good omen for this encounter.

There were seating cushions scattered in the center of the room, and Jade, Flower, and the sister queen Tempest sat there, with three other queens. All four Emerald Twilight queens had consorts with them, all about Moon's age, and from even a cursory glance he could tell that like the consorts up in the bowers, they were all better dressed and prettier than he was. At least Ash wasn't present, which would save some embarrassment.

As Moon and Stone stepped out of the passage, all the queens and consorts turned to look. Moon froze for a heartbeat, pinned by those concentrated stares.

Jade touched an empty cushion next to her. Stone put a hand on Moon's lower back and gave him a little push forward. Moon forced himself to move at an even pace, to walk to Jade and sit down. "Where were you?" she whispered.

Settling next to Flower, Stone answered for him. "He got in a fight with a daughter queen then ran off with the reigning queen's consort."

Jade stared at Stone. "What?"

Flower leaned around Stone to frown at Moon. "Where was this?"

Moon threw a glare at Stone. "I saw Shadow and he said—"

But Tempest cleared her throat, making it obvious they were being rude. Jade turned back to face her and the other queens, her jaw tense as if she suppressed a hiss. Moon sat back on the cushion and tried to hide his impatience.

Tempest formally introduced the other queens and consorts. Three of the other consorts had been born in different courts, Sky Cinnabar and Sunset Water. The way this was presented made it clear they represented very important alliances. Then it was Jade's turn. She introduced Stone, and then said, "My consort, Moon of Indigo Cloud."

There was a short expectant silence. Then one of the other queens

tilted her head inquiringly. “Of a different bloodline within Indigo Cloud?”

Oh, here we go, Moon thought, gritting his teeth. They had to know the answer already, either from someone who had seen the confrontation with Ash in the greeting hall or who had heard him talking to Shadow in the bowers. If Flower’s sardonic expression was any indication, she thought so, too. Stone just looked bored.

Jade didn’t betray any irritation by so much as a single spine twitch. She said, “No. He’s the only survivor of a court that was destroyed almost forty turns ago.”

There was another silence, this one far more uncomfortable. There weren’t many replies the other queens could make without calling Jade a liar, or calling Moon a liar and Jade a fool for believing him. Tempest flicked her tail and gave the queen who had spoken a look of reproof. Moon couldn’t tell if the reproof was for being rude or for presenting Jade with the opportunity to be rude back.

Then a faint sound from above made everyone look up. Someone was climbing down the wall, and Moon didn’t need anyone to tell him that this was Ice, the reigning queen.

She was easily twice Pearl’s size, and her scales looked pale, barely tinted with yellow, but reflected warm gold as the light struck them. She was so old she had started to lose her color. Her frills had grown long and wispy, like frayed silk. When she partly extended her wings to balance, Moon could see the bones outlined through the near-translucent skin.

She had to be much older than Shadow, who was mature but hadn’t begun to show noticeable gray on his groundling skin. Moon wondered how many consorts she had outlived.

She reached the floor, then Shadow half-dropped, half-glided down after her. He shifted to groundling and they both moved to join the other queens. Ice sat down on the cushions that waited for her, Shadow taking a seat beside her.

If Tempest was supposed to make the formal introduction of Jade, Ice didn’t wait for it. She said, “Jade, sister queen of Indigo Cloud. You have a lovely young consort. May he come closer?”

Moon thought he was plenty close enough and had a moment to hope that this was another attempt to trick them into violating etiquette, that it was expected that Jade would refuse. Then Jade turned her head toward him, said in a breathless whisper, “Go on. Just sit in front of her, two paces away.”

Apparently she was serious. Moon managed to get up without fumbling or tripping over the cushion. He crossed over to Ice, his spine prickling with tension, and sank to the floor in front of her. His hand made a sweaty mark on the polished wood.

Ice regarded him. Her eyes were dark, with a faint rim of blue, and her gaze seemed to go right through him. She wore jeweled sheaths on her claws, the gems tiny sparks of blue and green. She said, "You remember nothing of your birthcourt?"

Shadow must have told her everything. At least Moon didn't have to repeat the story in front of the other queens. He cleared his throat.

"No."

Her brows arched. "Not what it was called, not the queen's name?" Moon found her size daunting. He had to force himself not to lean back away from her. "Nothing."

"Hmm." She didn't sound doubtful, just thoughtful. "And after so long alone, it was not difficult for you to... adjust, to living within a court?"

He should lie and say no, it wasn't difficult at all. But her eyes were sharp, a wise old predator's eyes, and he knew she wouldn't believe him. He said, "Yes, it's been... very strange."

Ice smiled in dry acknowledgement. "I can imagine." She lifted her hand, and the jewels on her claws glinted as she made a gesture of dismissal. "Go back to your queen."

Relieved, Moon pushed to his feet and went to take his seat behind Jade again. He ignored the look Stone tried to give him. Jade touched his knee lightly, a reassurance.

Ice turned her attention to Jade. "This new knowledge of the Fell, and what they are capable of, is of import. I agree that it should be known as widely as possible and will send messengers to all the courts we are allied with." Almost as an afterthought, she added, "Shadow has told me of the theft from your colony tree. Your mentor may speak to ours."

Jade inclined her head to Ice. "I thank you."

As Ice turned away to speak to Tempest, Jade gave Flower a meaningful glance. Flower got to her feet, murmuring, "Wish me luck."

Moon felt a knot of tension evaporate from his spine. *They're going to help.* They could get the seed and be gone by tonight.

Chapter Six

The sister queens made more pointed conversation, but mercifully none of it was about Moon's lack of bloodline. They also talked about other courts in the Reaches, a subject which Moon found

fascinating. Stone apparently didn't think so, and after a while exercised his right as a line-grandfather to just get up and wander off without a word to anyone. Moon found himself trying to calculate how many turns it would be before he could get away with that.

Ice finally claimed to be fatigued so they could all escape, and an Arbora came to show them to the guest chambers.

Moon and Jade were in a passage that spiraled down away from the hall, when Jade asked, "What did Stone mean when he said you got into a fight with a queen?"

Their Arbora guide, in groundling form with dark curly hair and an amber-colored dress, politely quickened her steps to get out of earshot. Moon slid a sideways look at Jade. Her spines were still under rigid control from speaking to the other queens, but the scales on her brow were furrowed. He said, reluctantly, "There wasn't a fight. A daughter queen called Ash said something to me in the greeting hall. I said something back. Then Shadow came and sent her away, and asked me to come to the consorts' bowers with him."

Jade hissed through her teeth. Feeling the hiss was aimed at him as well as Ash, he said, "I know, I should have ignored her."

She was quiet for a long moment, then said, "Well. Maybe nothing will come of it."

The guest quarters were lower down in the colony, big round chambers hanging around the outer ring of the mountain-thorn. Jade and Moon climbed steps that wound up through doorways in the curved walls woven through with faintly glowing vines and moss. The Arbora led them to a room with a tile-lined pool set into the center of the floor. Four hanging bower beds were stuffed with blankets and the wood beneath them spread with striped grasseater hides.

The warriors were already there, sitting near the edge of the pool. They all looked bored and worried, and Chime even jumped to his feet

when he saw them. “Well?” he demanded.

Jade quelled him with a look and he sat down with a thump. She turned to the Arbora and thanked her formally, then waited for her to leave before she turned back to the others.

“How did it go?” Balm asked, too anxious to wait longer.

As Jade took a seat on the furs, she asked, “Are we alone here?” Moon settled next to her and glanced around. The woven walls didn’t provide much of a sound barrier; he could see through the gaps to the walkway.

Vine jerked his chin toward the far side of the chamber. “There’s a group visiting from a court further west, but they’re down at the other end.”

Jade kept her voice low. “Ice acknowledged us, and Flower went to speak to their mentors. We should know soon.”

Floret and Vine exchanged a look. There was definitely an undercurrent there, but Moon couldn’t tell if they thought Jade had done too well, or not well enough. Balm nodded thoughtfully, and Chime slumped in relief. Song blurted, “So we just wait?”

“Yes.” Balm gave her a stern look. “We wait.” Song subsided reluctantly.

It should have been a good time to nap, but everyone seemed too tense to settle down. Moon shifted and jumped up to the top of the chamber, and wrapped his tail around a strong vine to hang upside down. It was a position that helped him relax.

The others aimlessly wandered the chamber or pretended to rest. Jade and Balm had drawn together to talk quietly, which was probably a good sign. If they could get back their old relationship, from before the Fell had changed everything, it would be a relief for Moon.

Chime shifted and climbed up to join him, clinging with his claws to the vines. He whispered, “Does Jade know about that queen, in the greeting hall?”

“Yes.” Moon looked at him over the edge of his wing. “Why?”

“Nothing. If—” Chime shrugged and settled his spines. “I guess that’s going to be all right, then. We talked to some of their warriors. I can’t believe how big this court is.”

Chime had never been to another court before either, and wanted to talk about it. Fortunately he didn’t really need a response from Moon, who just listened and made thoughtful noises occasionally.

Sometime later they heard someone coming up the steps to the chamber, and everyone tensed in expectation, thinking it was Flower returning. But it was only another Arbora, come to tell them there was to be a formal dinner later in the day and that they were invited to attend. This seemed to please Vine and Floret and Song, at least, but it just made Moon more impatient. *Does it really take that long to say “yes” and hand over a seed?* Maybe it did, but if there was some lengthy process the mentors had to go through to get the seed ready, it seemed like Flower could have sent a message to tell them so.

Finally, they heard someone on the walkway again, and this time it was Flower and Stone.

As they came up the steps Moon dropped to the floor again and shifted back to groundling. He didn't think the news was good. Flower's expression was tense and thoughtful, and Stone didn't look relieved. The others gathered anxiously around, and Jade pushed to her feet. "Well?"

Flower took a deep breath. "They can't give us a seed."

Moon hissed a frustrated breath and glanced at Jade. Her spines lifted and she asked dangerously, "Can't or won't?"

Stone answered, "Can't." With a weary groan, he sat down on one of the furs. "Their mentors thought that a new seed wouldn't work on a mountain-tree that had already been implanted."

Flower added, "Our tree would keep dying and the seed would be wasted. They're looking back through their lore on the seeds to make certain."

Her voice tight, Jade said, "So they can't help us."

"I didn't say that." Flower hesitated, as if not certain how much she wanted to explain. "They had a suggestion. This court has a number of mentors, with several elders. They think we can all augur for the location of our seed."

Augur for it? Caught between disappointment and hope, Moon glanced at Stone, who just shrugged slightly. Moon took that to mean that Stone had no idea if this was possible and wasn't going to give an opinion on it. Jade asked Flower, "And what do you think?"

Flower spread her hands. "I've never done anything like that before, but I think we have to try. We don't have any other path to take at the moment."

Vine said, "But what if whoever took the seed destroyed it?" Song nodded anxiously.

Flower betrayed some exasperation. "Then the augury won't work."

Watching Flower intently, Chime said, "Do they really think it's still somewhere around here, and we can just go and get it?"

"They have no idea." Flower's voice was wry. "But we don't know why the groundlings took it, and anything could be possible." She looked around at them all. "They aren't certain, but they think a colony tree would only be able to last two or three turns without its seed. It will rot from the inside out."

And it's already been gone a turn, at least. Moon folded his arms, trying to contain his impatience. They had to try this. The groundlings had been traveling on the forest floor, and that had to be dangerous. They might have been killed, the seed left to lie forgotten in the moss somewhere. *If it hasn't been eaten by a grasseater.* If it hadn't... How far could groundlings on foot travel in a turn, through hard country? *Not nearly as far as we can.*

"Of course you'll have to try," Jade said. "But will it be hard on you?"

"Yes," Flower admitted. "But it's not something I can leave to others."

Jade nodded, acknowledging the necessity. "We'll wait for word from you."

As Flower left, Chime looked after her, his expression miserable. Then he shifted and jumped up to the ceiling of the chamber, and curled himself into a tight ball among the vines.

Floret snorted derisively. "What's that about?"

"He wants to help," Moon said it deliberately, keeping his tone just short of threat. He wasn't in the mood to hear any garbage from the warriors, about Chime or anything else. "He can't."

Floret twitched uncomfortably. To her credit, she said, "I forgot."

Song sighed. "I want to help too, but there's nothing we can do but wait."

"No." Jade tapped her claws impatiently. "We have to go to this stupid dinner."

□

Moon had never been to a formal meal in a court before. Usually eating meant either tearing apart a kill outside, or sitting around with everyone talking while they passed around food. This was a little

different.

It was held in a well that wound up around the central trunk of the mountain-thorn, its walls ringed with wide platforms and crossed at intervals by bridges for the Arbora. The light emanated from living cascades of blue and purple flowers, growing from vines woven through the branches that supported the structure. Moon and Jade shared a balcony with Tempest, her three sister queens, and their consorts, everyone sitting on furs and cushions covered with rich fabrics. The younger unattached queens and consorts were confined to separate platforms across the chamber.

Ice and Shadow sat on another platform with the leaders of their Arbora. Stone had vanished again at some point on the way to the well. Most of the court, including Balm and Chime and the others, were seated on the platforms below. From what Moon could hear, it was a lot more lively down there. The only ones not present were Flower and the Emerald Twilight mentors.

Earlier, Moon had asked Jade why Emerald Twilight was putting itself out to entertain them. She had said, "They probably don't get many sister queens and consorts as visitors. Usually it's young daughter queens, or warriors acting as messengers or bringing Arbora to trade crafts."

It explained Shadow's curiosity about Moon. As reigning queen, Ice probably never left the colony, which meant Shadow never left either. He probably got few opportunities to talk to consorts he didn't already live with.

Before the food was brought, the queens sat to one side of the platform to talk, with the consorts taking the other. On their side, Jade and Tempest and the others made pointedly polite and occasionally cutting remarks at each other until it was apparent that no one was going to be lured into an embarrassing outburst.

On the other side, the consorts stared at Moon, and he stared back. These were the consorts taken by the sister queens, the ones with important bloodlines who represented important alliances. Finally, one said, "They said you threatened Ash in the greeting hall."

None of the queens had mentioned the incident. Moon was starting to suspect that if one of them brought it up, Jade might have to do something about it, like fight Ash. Which would be a stupid waste of a fight, considering how easily Shadow had dealt with it. He corrected, "She threatened me."

"And you offered to fight her," another consort said, his derision obvious. "That was foolish. What if she was hotheaded enough to

accept?"

Moon looked away, knowing his expression was sardonic. "Then maybe next time she'd think twice."

"You'd fight a queen?"

"If I had to."

"They claimed he fought Fell." This was said with deliberately provoking skepticism.

Moon turned his head just enough to eye the speaker. Apparently he was being asked to prove it. The trick was to do that without disrupting the dinner.

He was still young enough that his wounds had healed without scars. All except one. He pulled his shirt down his right shoulder and twisted around. At least two of them gasped.

Only the very top of the red ridge of scar tissue was visible, where it curved up along his shoulder blade. It marked the spot where Ranea had broken his wing joint in his other form. It hadn't made an open wound, but when he had shifted to groundling, it had transformed into broken bones and this ridge of damaged skin. Flower had said it would probably fade a little over time, but it didn't hurt often now and it wasn't where he could see it, so it didn't much concern him.

He pulled his shirt back up and turned around. They were all staring, this time with shock rather than disdain.

After that, the consorts talked to each other, but not to Moon.

Jade had said Indigo Cloud had had consorts fight to defend the colony, but Emerald Twilight was too secure to need defending. Moon had proved he was different from them. Too different. *You are your own worst enemy*, he told himself. Not that that was a new revelation; it was just that he was starting to notice it more.

Emerald Twilight warriors started to bring food, and the consorts got up to join the queens. Moon took his place next to Jade and settled on her cushion. She leaned against him, her scales a welcome warmth. Her voice pitched low, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes." He had thought he had his expression under control, but maybe not. "Do I look upset?"

"You look angry."

That was funny, because all he felt was weary resignation. He looked away and she didn't press the point.

The warriors who were probably clutchmates or lovers of the

queens and consorts were invited to stay and eat with them, and the conversation became more cordial, but that was a mixed blessing. Moon had already been stared at enough. Now he had the warriors sneaking curious glances at him.

At least the food was good. There was meat, raw and fresh, cut into small pieces so you didn't have to shift to chew it, and piles of cut and peeled fruit. There were also various roots, some raw and some spiced and baked in coals to soften them and bring out the flavor. There wasn't any flatbread like the Arbora in Indigo Cloud made, but there was a pressed seedcake that was almost as good.

It had been a long, anxious day, and once Moon had a full stomach, it was hard to stay awake. He tried to find a position where he could lean against Jade's shoulder and doze off without falling over, when she said, "Was that true, what you told Ice? That you don't remember anything about your birthcourt?"

She kept her voice low. The others were still occupied in talking or eating. "You thought I was lying?" He had to admit, he did lie a lot. Turns and turns of lying his way into groundling settlements, lying about what he had done and where he had been and how he had gotten from here to there so fast, had made it second nature.

"It occurred to me," she said, her voice a little wry. "Well?"

"No." His earliest memory was of sleeping in the bole of a tree, warmly tucked in with the four young Arbora. *Leaf, Bliss, Light, and Fern*. He hadn't let himself think their names in a long time. "I don't remember anything. I told Shadow that, too."

"Hmm." Using her claws with delicate precision, Jade picked a pit out of a piece of fruit. "Maybe Ice just wanted a close look at you, then."

"Why?"

"She might have thought she could recognize what court you came from. Sometimes queens and consorts from the same bloodlines have a strong resemblance to each other."

He looked at her closely, trying to see it, but she just looked like Jade. "You don't look like Pearl."

"To another queen, I do." She straightened, frowning. "What's this?"

Moon pushed himself upright to see someone glide over from the platform where the unattached queens had been seated. Moon recognized the gray and green pattern of her scales and cursed under his breath. It was Ash.

By the time she landed all the queens were alert, the consorts and warriors startled and a little wary. Tempest's spines twitched in agitation.

Ash stopped in front of Jade, spines aggressively lifted. "I'm Ash."

Jade regarded her steadily. "And why should I care?"

Ash bared her teeth. "I spoke to your consort in the greeting hall. I said I thought he was a pretty thing and was surprised that you left him unprotected among us. But then I found out you were desperate enough to take a solitary."

Moon didn't move, though he dearly wanted to jump right off the platform, whether he could shift or not. The greeting hall had seemed private compared to this, with the queens and consorts staring and the sound dying away above and below as the rest of the court gradually realized something awkward was happening.

With unstudied calm, Jade sipped tea and set the cup aside, her extended claws clicking against the pottery. "Your bitter envy of my fortunate choice of consort is your shame, not mine."

Ash snarled. "Your consort offered to fight me. If you aren't afraid —"

Jade shoved to her feet and shifted to her winged form in a blur of motion. Moon rolled away and landed in a crouch, braced to shift and leap. Jade halted barely a pace from Ash, spines flared. Ash jerked back in reflex, but all Jade did was say, "I accept your challenge."

Ash growled, but it was unconvincing; she had given ground by flinching away. Trying to make up for it, she looked at Moon and said, "When I win, maybe I'll take you."

Moon bared his teeth. "If you win, I'll eat your guts."

Ash stared at him, incredulous. Jade said, with deceptive mildness, "That's not an idle threat." She flicked her spines. "Do you mean to fight me now or at some undetermined point in the future?"

Tempest's deep-voiced snarl cut across Ash's reply. "Settle this outside."

For a long frozen moment, the two queens didn't move. Jade stood like a statue, a coiled threat. Ash was breathing hard and, Moon realized suddenly, struggling to keep her spines flared. Maybe she hadn't realized Jade was older. *Or used to facing down Pearl*, he thought.

Then Ash stepped back, spines quivering. She said, "Outside, then."

Jade eyed her, then turned deliberately and stepped to the edge of the platform. Collecting Moon with a glance, she jumped off into the well.

Moon shifted and jumped after her. Three platforms down she dropped onto the balcony where Chime, Balm, and the others sat. Moon didn't stop, spiraling down toward the bottom of the well. At least Ash had waited until they were finished eating.

Jade must have only spoken briefly to the warriors, because she landed just a moment after Moon. She started immediately for the archway that led out of the well. The tilt of her spines said she was furious, and he was starting to feel a burning resentment of his own. *This is not my fault.*

Moon followed her into a wide foyer, where several passages met. Jade stopped beside a fountain that cascaded down carved rocks into a flower-strewn pool. She faced him and said, flatly, "You offered to fight her." The growl grew in her voice. "What were you thinking?"

He knew he should shift to groundling; it was dangerous to argue like this. But he cocked his head, deliberately provoking. "I was thinking I was offering to fight her."

"Queens don't fight consorts."

"That's hard to believe."

Her eyes narrowed, conveying cold threat. "When I fight her, don't interfere."

Resentment turned into fury, and he flared his spines. "If she leaves a scratch on you, I'll rip her apart."

He could tell it was taking a good deal of her control not to just slap him in the head. "Moon—"

"You knew what I was when you brought me here." He hissed in pure frustration. "I'm not like them. I never will be."

Jade's tail lashed, but his words seem to strike home. She regarded him steadily, and the growl had left her voice when she said, "You can pretend to be like them while we're here."

Stricken, Moon looked away. That was... not an unreasonable request. He just didn't know why he couldn't grant it. *You provoked Ash, and you've walked into enough strange places to know better.* But he had spent so many turns trying to fit in to whatever group he was with, trying to conform to expectations he barely understood. It was as if he had used up all his patience for it, and had none left for his own people. "I can't pretend anymore."

Jade shook her head, her tail still twitching. But she sounded resigned. “Ash is young.”

He faced her again. “So are you.”

Jade tilted her head in irony. “I’m bigger. I’m stronger. And I’ve fought in earnest. She hasn’t.”

A warrior landed on the floor of the well and shifted to groundling as she walked through the arch. It was Willow, who had welcomed them in the greeting hall. She stopped a few paces away and addressed Jade. “Tempest wanted me to speak to you.”

Jade’s mouth set in a grim line. “Go on.”

“This wasn’t planned.” Willow twitched, uncomfortable. “Ash is the youngest daughter queen in the court, and rash with it. She was goaded by her sisters and their warriors, who are just as foolish as she is.”

Jade’s spines twitched uneasily. This had to be a generous admission of fault on Tempest’s part, even if it was being made through her warrior. Apparently it required an admission in return, because Jade said, “My consort is accustomed to defending himself. He didn’t realize she meant to make a childish insult, not a real threat.”

Moon looked down, resisting the urge to dig at the floor with his claws. He had realized it; he just hadn’t cared.

Willow hesitated, then added, “I know Tempest would rather this challenge not take place.”

Jade inclined her head. “Tell her if Ash doesn’t appear, I won’t pursue her. If she does appear... I won’t kill her.”

Relief flickered in Willow’s expression. “I’ll tell Tempest. Thank you.”

□

They went through the colony’s greeting hall, outside to the open platform they had landed on when they had first arrived. Stone waited there in groundling form, his opaque expression somehow conveying a deep disgust with all of them, but especially Moon.

There was no one else on the platform, and only a few warriors in flight, circling near the outer barrier of thorns. Jade walked forward, crouched, and took to the air; hard flaps of her wings carried her out away from the colony’s platforms. She banked before the thorn barrier and began to circle. The patrolling warriors stayed well away from her.

Moon shifted to groundling, folded his arms, and tried not to tense his shoulders. Stone was silent in a way that seemed to speak volumes. Moon wanted to say something, like *I didn't mean for this to happen*. Saying it to Stone would be useless; he should have said it to Jade. He had helped Ash do something terribly stupid. A real consort would have ignored her or deflected her attention and never let it get to this point.

Self-consciously he looked for Ash, trying to see if she was perched somewhere on the vines or branches, but she wasn't here yet. *Maybe she won't come.*

On a broad balcony built out onto a curving branch above and to one side of the greeting hall entrance, Tempest stood under the shadows of the vines.

After a moment, a subdued group with two queens and several warriors walked out of the greeting hall entrance and moved to the opposite side of the platform from Moon and Stone. The two queens must be unattached, because they were Ash's age or younger, and they hadn't been among those introduced by Tempest. The warriors were in groundling form, all young and pretty, wearing colorful clothes and an excess of jewelry. He wondered if these were the rash companions that Willow had mentioned. So far they were the only spectators. Keeping his voice low, he asked Stone, "Why aren't the Arbora coming out?"

Stone said, with a tinge of irony, "They have more sense. The court won't want to make more of this than it has to."

Moon heard a rustle overhead and looked up in time to see Ash shoot out of an opening high in the curve of the mountain-thorn. He twitched and managed not to shift, watching her arc toward Jade.

Jade waited until almost the last instant, then twisted in midair and fell out of Ash's path. Ash banked smoothly back toward her and the two circled each other. They might have been talking but they were too far away for Moon to hear.

This went on long enough for Moon's already tense nerves to tighten past bearing. He kept hoping Ash would change her mind, but the way she steadily gained height wasn't a good sign. Jade had to see it, but she wasn't trying to counter. Then Ash suddenly twisted to fall on Jade.

The two queens met in a furious flurry of wings and tails, plunging down toward the ground far below. Moon set his jaw, though his whole body shook with the instinct to leap into the air and join the fight.

The flurry stopped, with Jade on Ash's back. Jade's wings shot out and cupped to slow their descent. Ash flapped weakly and Jade released her, and watched as she glided down toward the lower branches of the colony.

Three warriors jumped off the platform to spiral down after her. The others stood there, not looking at each other, clearly uncomfortable and guilty. Jade flew leisurely toward the balcony where Tempest waited. It was empty now, the other queen having already vanished inside.

Stone just grunted, and said, "Come back in."

There wasn't anything else to do. Moon followed him.

□

They returned to their guest quarters. The warriors were there now, sitting near the pool. This time it was Song who jumped to her feet and demanded, "What happened?"

"Jade won," Stone said succinctly, taking a seat on the furs.

"We knew that would happen. But what..." Song took in Moon's expression, and subsided. "I don't really need to know the details."

Moon went to the far side of the chamber, where the wall curved around. There was an opening in the woven barrier, a small shelf that extended through the outer wall under an arbor of vines. It looked down onto a broad garden platform with fruit trees. Only a few Arbora worked on it now, climbing the trees at the far end to pick fruit. Moon sat down on the shelf, hoping no one came after him.

The breeze was cool with the approach of evening, thick with the scent of the white flowers on the sapling trees. He wondered what they would do if Frost grew up to be headstrong and overly aggressive, starting fights with every other young queen in reach. He concluded glumly that Indigo Cloud would probably be lucky to get to the point where that was the worst thing they had to worry about. After a time, he heard someone come up the steps from the walkway.

He heard Jade's voice as she spoke to the others, too low to catch the words. Then she picked her way over toward the back of the chamber, toward Moon. She ducked under the arbor of vines and settled next to him. He slid a look at her, saw she was in her Arbora form, apparently unhurt.

She said, "I spoke with Ice and Tempest and Shadow. We came to the conclusion that Ash is hotheaded even for a queen, and she would probably have gotten in a fight sooner or later. They expressed relief that the fight was with a queen who had the self-control not to hurt

her badly, and that the consort she chose to harass was not one who was so sheltered as to be terrified by her. You weren't terrified by her, were you?"

Moon eyed her. He couldn't see much resemblance to Pearl, but this was one of the times when he could tell that Jade was descended from Stone. "No."

Jade flicked away a stray flower petal. "I didn't think so."

So that seemed to be the end of it. It had all been mostly Moon's fault but he had avoided any of the consequences, by virtue of being a consort. Except that all of Emerald Twilight thought he was a crazy savage, but he was used to that. "What does our court think about me?" Jade's brows lifted at the unexpected question. She didn't answer immediately, thinking it over. "The teachers and hunters like you. They've spent more time with you, they know you better. And they know what they owe you after you went into the Dwei hive after Heart and the others. The soldiers don't like you, but then..."

Moon had figured that. "They blame me for bringing the Fell." Jade pressed her lips together. "They'll get over it." Her tone suggested that they had better. "In the meantime, Knell will keep them from starting any trouble."

That was a surprise. "Why? He told Stone he didn't think I should be with the court."

Jade gave him a dry look. "That was before you started showing interest in Chime. Chime is his clutchmate, and since he changed, he hasn't had any status among the Aeriats. So becoming the favorite of a consort wasn't something anyone expected for him."

Moon had realized Chime's lot in the court had improved by association with him. But he didn't think Chime had calculated it. He thought Chime had just been drawn to someone who was also different, who was a misfit. "That must make it hard for Knell."

"Knell can handle it. When Chime changed, it was a shock, but it finally convinced everyone who still had their heads buried in the dirt that something was wrong. All the doubters finally admitted that we needed to move to another colony. If a few of the others had changed too, it would probably have made it easier on Chime. He wouldn't have stood out quite so much. But that won't happen now."

"Now that the court is away from the old colony, maybe Chime will change back." If that happened, Moon was certain Chime would miss flying, but Chime had also made it clear that he would rather be an Arbora than a warrior.

“Flower didn’t think so.” Jade frowned absently. “It was strange enough that it happened once. But we’ll have to wait and see. We’re away from the Fell influence, we have plenty of food at the colony, and more room than we can fill.”

Moon looked out over the terrace. “If we can stay there.” She nodded, resigned. “If we can stay.”



Outside the walls of thorn, the dark of evening settled over the forest. Jade had gone back in some time ago, but Moon stayed, still wanting to avoid conversation with the others until the thrilling excitement of Jade fighting another queen over him had worn off.

He was going to have to get better at dealing with the pressure of others’ personalities. He had lived in crowded places before, but he had always been an outsider. With the Raksura he was still an outsider, but everything he did and said mattered so much more. He watched two warriors fly past the outer edge of the platform, the reflected light from the colony glinting off their scales. *You have to get better at this*, he told himself.

When the night insects sang in chorus and a light rain began to patter the leaves, he went back inside.

Stone was the only one sitting up. He was beside the hearth basin, nursing a cup of tea. No one had gone up into the bower beds; they were all dozing on the floor. Jade was curled up on a fur, but not asleep. She patted the spot next to her and Moon picked his way through the prone if not sleeping bodies.

He lay down beside her and she tugged him back against her chest and nuzzled his neck. His clothes were damp and the fabric cold with the night air. Her body heat was a welcome warmth that sank right through him. *You have to get better at this*, he thought again. Because he couldn’t leave these people. *Your people*.

Chime sat up on one elbow and said softly, “Maybe we should send someone to see if she’s all right.”

Jade sighed, her breath warm in Moon’s hair. “That’s... not a bad suggestion. Stone, do you know where—”

Stone lifted his head, suddenly alert. “Here she comes.”

Moon sat up as Jade uncoiled from around him. He could hear it now, too: Flower, with two other Arbora, approaching along the walkway. The others stopped at the stairs up to the guest chamber, spoke quietly for a moment, then Flower came up the steps alone.

They were all on their feet by the time she reached the doorway. She looked terrible. There were dark smudges of exhaustion under her eyes, and her skin was so pale it looked nearly translucent. Vine was closest, and caught her hand to help her. He guided her to the nearest cushion. Flower sat down heavily, saying in irritation, "I'm fine, I'm fine."

Jade sat in front of her as they all gathered around. "Tell us."

"We saw the way to our stolen seed." Flower rubbed her temple with the heel of her hand. "It's good we came here. I couldn't have done this alone, and the others at home are too young to be much help." She took a roll of paper out of her robe and spread it on the fur. "It's vague, but it should get us near enough for me to augur the rest of the way myself."

Stone leaned over and studied it intently. Moon sat forward to see over his shoulder. It was a map, drawn in bold strokes, with scribbled writing in Raksuran, all in different hands and inks. Several of the Emerald Twilight mentors must have contributed. Stone said, "To the west, past the Reaches." He tapped a section. "This is water?"

Flower nodded. "We saw a lake, or an inland sea. It's at least a day of warrior's flight over water, southwest." She blinked, and swayed.

"Rest," Jade told her. "We know enough now to make plans." At Jade's nod, Vine scooped Flower up despite her exhausted protest.

Chime and Song hurried to make a bed near the hearth basin, piling up furs and cushions. Vine set Flower down in it and she grumbled, "I just need to lie down for a bit." She curled up in the cushions and was asleep immediately.

Jade took the map from Stone and turned it so she could read it. The others gathered around again, watching her. Song said, "What should we do?"

Floret nudged the paper. "Take it back to ask Pearl."

"That's a waste of time," Jade spoke with quiet authority, looking around at them all. "We need to get there as soon as we can. We'll leave at dawn."

Vine exchanged an opaque look with Floret. He said, "Pearl isn't going to like it."

"She's not going to like it whatever we do," Moon said. He didn't think he was exaggerating there. "But we have to go after the seed. We don't know that the groundlings aren't still traveling with it. This spell showed where it is now, not where it's going to be five days from

now if we go back to the tree so Pearl can tell us to go find it.”

“It’s not our only choice,” Floret said, though it was clear she was uncomfortable defying Jade. “Pearl might not want us to find it. She might think it was a better idea for Stone to go outside the Reaches and look for another ruin to turn into a colony.”

Moon said, “Pearl didn’t want to move when the old colony was surrounded by Fell and Stone actually knew where to go. You think she wants to move now?”

“Back east, to another place we can’t defend, while we’re so weak?” Chime added. “What if other Fell hear what happened and come looking for us?”

Floret hissed, more in dismay than threat. “Stone hasn’t said he doesn’t know where we should go.”

Stone snorted. “If Stone had a better suggestion Stone would have made it before now.”

Jade fixed Floret with a gaze hard enough to make her twitch uneasily. “Are you saying this because it’s your opinion, or because it’s the opposite of what I want and what you think you should say to support Pearl?”

Floret glanced at Vine for support, but he said nothing. After a tense moment, she admitted reluctantly, “I don’t want to have to move again. That’s my opinion.”

Jade said, “That’s my opinion, too. We’ll go after the seed while we have the chance.” She waited a moment for more objections, but no one else spoke up. She added, “Song and Floret will go back to tell Pearl where we’ve gone.”

Moon flicked a wary look at Vine and Floret, and he wasn’t the only one. Vine didn’t react, but Floret’s mouth set in a cynical line. Chime was the least experienced next to Song. He should have been sent back, not Floret. But Jade trusted him more.

Jade ignored the byplay, picking up the map. “And we should draw a copy of this for you to take to Pearl. If we don’t return, she can send others after us.”

“I’ll copy it.” Chime reached for the map and got to his feet. “Flower has paper and ink in her bag.”

As Chime carried the map away, Moon watched Floret and Vine. Jade lifted a brow at them, and said, “You have something to say?”

Floret started to speak but Vine said, “No.” Floret stared at him and he told her in exasperation, “I know what Pearl is going to say.

But when she calms down, she'll realize this was right. The groundlings could move the seed, and Emerald Twilight might not be willing to help Flower augur it again. If we all went back to let her make the decision, she'd be angry about that, too."

Floret grimaced, and then let her breath out in resignation. "You're probably right. But you're not the one who has to tell her."

Chapter Seven

At dawn, Song and Floret left to carry the news to the colony tree, and Moon and the others flew west, following the mentors' directions.

It took them seven days to reach the edge of the forest, pushing the warriors as hard as they could. Jade and Moon took turns carrying Flower, which let Stone fly ahead to scout their route and find game so they could stay well fed, while Balm and Vine left markers in the treetops so whoever Pearl sent could follow them. It was Jade's opinion that Pearl was bound to send someone, since she wouldn't trust them to do this right. Moon just hoped they wouldn't need the help.

It wasn't as easy as flying over open country, and they had two days of rain, but food was plentiful and finding shelter in the suspended forest was never difficult. The long flights left them all exhausted but, as Moon had discovered on the other lengthy journeys he had taken with Raksura, it left no one with the energy to argue. When they stopped to eat and rest, Stone talked about his travels, and Chime told stories from the mentors' histories. Flower must have had stories too, but she was always too tired to talk. Moon knew from experience that being carried wasn't easy or comfortable, even for Arbora.

They all avoided the subject of what they would do if their quest failed. Before they had left Emerald Twilight, Flower and one of the other court's mentors had shown them a mountain-thorn seed. It was a dead one, separated from the husk and used only to show young Raksura what they looked like, but Flower had explained that their seed would be very similar. It was about the size of a melon, a light brown color, with a hard ribbed shell like a nut.

Moon had lifted it, feeling the light weight. He could tell this one was dead; it felt empty on the inside, the rind dried away to nothing. He said, "How long can our seed stay disconnected from the tree before it dies?"

Chime and the other warriors had stared at him in horror. Apparently none of them had thought of that. Always more practical, Jade answered calmly, "I asked Stone that and he said he didn't know."

The Emerald Twilight mentor, a withered gray-white Arbora who looked older than the mountain-thorn, took the seed back from Moon

and said ruefully, “No one knows. This has never happened before.”

The mentors had also been able to tell Flower the things that might need to be done to the seed to get it to attach to the tree again, once they found it. If they found it. It was all just speculation, since in the annals of seed-lore, this was a unique problem. But Flower had had Chime copy it all down, and sent it back to the court with Song and Floret.

Late afternoon of the seventh day, the forest ended abruptly, giving way to a field of lush green grass dotted with white and gold flowers, and then a vast blue body of water, stretching forever.

Moon landed on the shore and folded his wings. A light breeze came off the water, but he couldn't smell salt. A short strip of sandy beach dropped away abruptly into the shallows, which were thick with reeds, cattails, and blue and purple lilies, their pads a good couple of paces across. Insects hummed and frogs sang. He stepped down to where the waves lapped the sand and crouched, scooping up a handful of water to make certain. It tasted fresh, so this could be anything from a large lake to a sweetwater sea. He stood and looked up and down the shore. The land curved out in a great arc, and there was no sign of any groundling inhabitants.

The others landed a little further up the bank, and Jade set Flower on her feet. Stone circled twice overhead, then dropped down to light near the others and shift to groundling. Moon joined the group, the grass releasing a sweet fragrance as his claws pressed it down.

Stone stretched, then winced and rubbed his neck. “I'll scout for the island, the rest of you wait here.”

That was the only option. Flying over water was always problematic. Raksura could only go so far without rest and food, and they couldn't get real rest without stopping to shift to groundling. And it was one thing to fly out over the shallow Yellow Sea, knowing the direction of the islands and that they lay less than a day's flight for a warrior. It was another to fly out over an unknown body of water. But Stone had easily three times the range of even a young consort like Moon.

“You mean to start right away?” Jade looked out over the water. “You should rest and leave in the morning.”

Stone gave her a glare that Moon knew well. “I'm not wasting most of a day.”

“You should at least eat,” Moon told him. “It's a bigger waste if

you fall out of the sky and drown.”

This had the effect of transferring the glare to Moon. And Stone must be in a worse mood than it seemed, because he growled, a low rumble of threat.

Everyone twitched in nervous reaction, except for Moon, who was unimpressed, Jade, whose expression turned sardonic, and Flower, who yawned.

Stone was usually acerbic, but he didn't growl often, especially in his groundling form. He had done a good job of hiding his impatience so far, but it was clear he hadn't forgotten that it was his doing the court had come back to the colony tree. Moon figured that if someone was going to get slapped unconscious, it might as well be him. He said, “Good, let's fight. That'll save time too.”

Stone controlled a hiss, his jaw set. Then he flung his arms in the air. “Fine! Then get off your asses and hunt!”

As Stone stomped away, Chime, Balm, and Vine scattered toward the forest. “Hah,” Flower commented, and started back up the bank, wading through the tall grass.

Jade gave Moon a look, lifting a brow. He turned to stare out over the sea to avoid her gaze. Up to this point, the journey had been fairly straightforward. Now if the map was wrong, if they couldn't find the island, they would have to turn around and go back to Indigo Cloud. And then figure out where to look for a new colony.

They made a camp on one of the broad lower branches of a small mountain-tree at the edge of the forest, only about a hundred or so paces above the ground. Jade kept watch over Flower and Stone while they napped, and Balm and Vine went hunting. Chime dug in the shallows, looking for roots, and found some sand melons and big white clams, while Moon wandered along the shore and made sure nothing tried to eat him.

Balm and Vine came back shortly with two hoppers out of a herd further back in the forest, one for Stone and one for the rest of them to share. After they had cleaned up in the lake, Balm flew back up to the tree to talk to Jade. Vine stayed on the beach, and Moon took the opportunity to ask him, “Why are you so anxious to help Jade now?”

“Do I look anxious?” Vine said, cleaning his claws in the grass at the water's edge.

Moon didn't react to the attempt at a joke, and Vine said, reluctantly, “I'm older than River, I'm bigger than River, and he doesn't like me. And I'm not thrilled about having to defer to him.

And that's how it's going to be, until Pearl gets tired of him." He shrugged his spines. "It's different for Floret. No male warrior is going to order the female warriors around. They're too big, and they stick together."

It had the ring of truth. Moon said, "So you think you'll do better with Jade?"

Vine correctly interpreted the undertone of that question. "I think I don't have to put up with River telling me what to do. Jade's always been close to Balm; she was never interested in male warriors. And now you're here, I'm guessing no male warrior is going to have much chance with her."

Vine had that part right. Moon still didn't entirely trust him, though his motives made sense.

After they ate, Stone said only, "Don't wait up," before he shifted and set off across the water.

They watched from the branch, through the screen of leaves, until Stone's outline dwindled in the distance. Moon let out his breath, frustrated. He couldn't just sit here and wait.

It was a good day for flying, the bright blue sky clear except for a few high clouds. He turned to Jade. "We could scout along the shoreline, maybe find some sign that groundlings were here."

It was a relief that Jade didn't ask why they should bother, or what good it would do if they did find evidence of groundlings, because Moon couldn't answer either one of those questions. She looked at the warriors inquiringly. "Well? Scout or rest?"

"I'll scout," Balm said, sitting forward. She looked anxious for something to do as well.

Chime nodded. Vine said, "I'll go with Balm."

"No." Jade looked down the shoreline. She was in her Arbora form, and her shorter mane of spines trembled as she tasted the air. "I'll go with Balm. Vine will stay here with Flower."

Vine gasped at the unfairness. "Why me?"

Jade twitched her tail, but she sounded more amused than angry. "Because I said so."

It's a test, Moon thought. Another test. Jade must have also noticed that Vine seemed to be changing his allegiance from Pearl to her. It would be good if he did; Jade could use another male warrior, especially an experienced adult like Vine.

Vine grumbled and made it clear he was being ill-used, but didn't make any real protest. Jade and Balm set off to the south, and Moon and Chime headed north.



Moon flew along the curve of the shore, maintaining an easy pace so Chime could keep up with him. The fields between the forest and the beach were thick with grass and flowers, empty except for an occasional herd of grasseaters. Big and slow-moving, their backs were protected by a heavy green shell, so that only their little heads and stumpy feet were visible. Not a very good prospect for prey if they had to stay here much longer.

Moon wanted to get a good look at the shoreline, though he wasn't certain what he was looking for. *A groundling town with a harbor would be nice, a place where people who came across the sea to explore the forest might land their boats.*

To his surprise, it wasn't long before he found it, or what was left of it. First he spotted stone pilings standing in the shallow water, making a rough square shape. He tilted his wings, gliding downward for a closer view. It looked like the remains of a dock or a platform that had been built out from the shore. If there were any remnants left on the land, they were hidden under the grass.

The further they went, the more pilings they found, tracing the outlines of more elaborate structures. Soon they were flying over the scattered foundations of a whole maze of buildings, long docks, and causeways. Moon cupped his wings and dropped down to land on a broken pillar more than three paces across. The stone was chipped and coated with moss. Tiny blue fish darted in the water just below. Chime managed to land on another piling nearby and flailed his wings for balance. "This was a huge city," Chime called.

Moon turned to look down the shore. He had been so focused on what was below them, he hadn't noticed what was ahead. "Looks like some of it's still there." Some distance down the shoreline, he could just make out structures, round beehive shapes, standing high above the water. They might be a part of the ruined city still standing, or other inhabitants had taken over the old pilings for their own use.

"What?" Chime turned, his spines lifted as he spotted the distant shapes. "Huh. I wonder if they know anything about the groundlings out in the sea."

"We can ask," Moon said.



As they drew near the beehive city, they turned away from the shore, into the forest. Flying under the cover of the tree canopy, they landed on a branch at the edge of the open beach.

From here, Moon saw the buildings were made of braided wood, some hundreds of paces tall. They stood on a wooden grid built out over the water, using the old pilings as foundations. A fleet of light woven boats were tied up under the grid, but the inhabitants seemed to be farmers rather than fishers. Vines grew up out of the water, trained to wind up wooden racks along the sides of the walkways, until some of the hives looked as if they were growing out of a miniature forest. He could see the inhabitants, too, paddling their boats, crossing the catwalks between the upper levels of the hives, picking some sort of fruit or pods off the vines. They were Kek, just like the ones who lived under the mountaintree roots.

“This is no help,” Chime said, disappointed. “They couldn’t be the groundlings who came to our tree. The forest Kek would have known what they were.”

He was right. It was vaguely possible that the forest Kek had told them an elaborate lie to cover up the actions of their seashore-dwelling cousins, but this was still far from where the seed was supposed to be. And these Kek looked a little bigger, but were still no match for the bones of the dead thieves. “Maybe they saw something. It’s worth asking.”

It was worth asking, but Moon still felt strange flying into a groundling settlement, even a Kek settlement at the edge of the Raksuran Reaches. He circled over the area nearest the shore first, Chime following his lead, just to see what the reaction would be.

The Kek didn’t seem frightened or angry at the sight of two Raksura in the air. They came out of the vine racks and the hives to look up, point and call to each other.

Bracing himself, Moon circled down toward an open section of platform and cupped his wings to land. The wood creaked as his weight settled on it; it was surprisingly spongy underfoot. Moon folded his wings to make room as Chime dropped down behind him. The Kek gathered around the edge of the platform and crowded the catwalks above. They kept their distance but still didn’t seem afraid.

One Kek came toward them. Like the old leader in the forest, he had stringy white growths on his arms and a squarish head. In Raksuran, he said, hopefully, “Trade?”

Moon wished he had thought of that, but he had no idea what the Kek would want. He countered, “No. Talk?”

A little taken aback, the Kek looked from Moon to Chime. “Talk, yes?”

Chime tugged on one of Moon’s spines and whispered, “Shift.”

I hate this part. Moon was never going to get over feeling vulnerable in front of a large crowd of groundlings who knew what he was, not even the Golden Islanders or the Kek. Chime was still tugging. Moon shook off his grip and shifted to his groundling form. The cool wind off the water pulled at his shirt, and the bright sun, which he had barely felt on his scales, warmed the back of his neck.

Chime followed suit, and the watching Kek murmured to each other in what sounded like approval.

The leader gestured for them to follow and led them further into the city, between the high wooden hives. The heavy greenery grew everywhere, hanging from racks overhead, climbing the hive walls. The place smelled of sweet green plants and moss, combined with the clean acrid scent that came from the Kek themselves.

On the brief walk they mutually managed to establish that the leader was called Khitah, and they were called Moon and Chime. Presumably the Raksura this city normally traded with could speak Kek, because Khitah had as much trouble speaking Raksuran as the forest Kek, and didn’t know any other groundling languages. Listening to him, Moon thought it was more the way the Kek’s mouth and throat were constructed; Khitah seemed to know far more Raksuran words than he could manage to say.

Khitah led them under one of the walkways bridging two of the hives and stopped to gesture up at it. Mounted along the arch of the bridge were several wooden plaques. Carved of warm-toned wood, they depicted views of the beehive city, with Kek paddling boats and harvesting their plants. It was clearly Arbora work.

Moon nodded, trying to look appreciative. Khitah seemed pleased.

Keeping his voice low, Chime said, “We should have brought them a gift.”

Exasperated, Moon asked him, “Did you know we were coming? Because I didn’t.”

“I’m just saying that next time we should—”

Moon turned to Khitah. “We want to ask about other people who live out on the sea. Islands? That way?” He pointed out toward the water, roughly in the direction the mentors thought the seed lay. “Islands. People,” Khitah agreed, and made an expansive gesture, indicating most of the sea.

“Good. But what about that way?” Moon pointed again.

Khitah considered it, as the breeze stirred the feathery growths on his arms and head. He wagged his stick-like fingers in what seemed to be the Kek equivalent of a shrug.

“Maybe they just don’t know,” Chime said, a little frustrated. “Those round boats couldn’t make it very far out into the water.”

“But they trade.” Moon had forced himself to shift in front of a strange groundling settlement with only Chime for company, and he was unwilling to give up so soon. “They have to see who travels back and forth here.”

Maybe some of those words struck a bell for Khitah, because he turned back to the passage and motioned them to follow again.

They wound their way further into the city, through the green shadows of the plant racks and into the bottom level of one of the hives. Overhead, Kek moved on the reed floors, called to each other in their soft voices, peered curiously down at the visitors.

They went down a ramp, then came out again to a dock area open to the sea. Partly sheltered from above by woven reed canopies, it had small wooden piers snaking out into the lapping water. Round Kek boats were tied up along most of the piers, except for one. Next to it was a large leafless tree, apparently growing up out of the water.

Not a tree, a boat, Moon realized, moving down the dock to get a closer look. It was round, the gray branches arching up from a thick mossy mat to form a bowl-shape. Something sat in the center, its form obscured by the branches.

Khitah pointed emphatically toward the strange boat. “Water traveler,” he said. “Go long way. Know much.” Moon started to step down onto the pier, but Khitah put a hand on his arm. His grip was light, like being caught by dry brush. He stared hard at Moon and said, “Careful.”

Moon nodded. The warning just confirmed his suspicion. “I will.”

“Why?” Chime squinted to get a better look at the shadowy shape inside the branches. “It’s just a groundling in a boat... isn’t it?”

“No. Stay here with Khitah.” Moon stepped down onto the pier, the reeds creaking under his weight, and moved toward the water traveler.

Drawing closer, he could see root-like tendrils floating in the water, growing out from the underside of the mat. The gray branches looked less like wood and more like gnarled horn. They were

connected to the being that sat in the center, growing out of its arms, legs, back, chest. It wasn't a groundling sitting in a boat; it was a waterling, and it was the boat.

A voice said, "Now what's this?" It spoke Altanic, low and sibilant. Something about it made the back of Moon's neck itch. The scent wafting toward him had a rank edge to it, odd for a water being of any kind. It was a predator's scent. "A curious groundling come to talk to old Nobent?"

"You could say that." Moon crouched on the pier, so his head was about even with Nobent's. It gave him a better view of the water traveler's face. It looked a little like a male groundling, his skin gnarled and gray like the horn structures growing out of his body. There were chips of the stuff above his eyes, down his cheeks, studding the curve of his skull. It wasn't that the growths or the gray coloring were particularly repellent. Stone was gray and a little gnarled too, though not to this extent. But this creature radiated menace. "I need to know if there are any groundlings living out on the sea, that might travel to this shore."

Nobent leaned forward. Out of the corner of his eye, Moon saw the outer branches of the boat stir slightly. Nobent smiled, deliberately revealing a toothless mouth. If he was meant to live like this, floating atop the sea, then there might be a second mouth in the bottom of the mossy-covered base that supported his upper limbs. *Top one for talking, lower one for eating*, Moon thought. It wasn't the oddest thing he had seen. The branches looked stiff, but he bet they could whip around, seize prey, and snatch it under water. Obviously the Kek didn't fear the creature, but there was hardly any meat on their light bones. It said, "Old Nobent doesn't hear well. Come closer."

Oh please, Moon thought. "Does that really work?"

Nobent hesitated, nonplussed, and something made Moon think that "Old Nobent" wasn't so old. Nobent's lips curled in derision. "You're not scared of old Nobent? Nobent isn't scary."

Nobent was, however, annoyingly single-minded. *This could go on forever*. Moon shifted, flared his spines, snapped his wings out so they were half-unfurled. "I am."

With a startled snarl, Nobent jerked back. His whole structure rocked and splashed water up onto the pier. Unimpressed, Moon flicked droplets off his claws. He said, mildly, "I'm not hungry yet."

Nobent crouched, tugged his branches in tightly and made a protective cage around himself. "What do you want?"

“You know what I want. Tell me about groundlings who live out on the sea. Are there islands out there? Cities, traders? Do they come to this shore?”

Nobent eased forward, the fear in his expression turning into crafty greed. “Are you Fell? I’ve heard of Fell. You want the sea-goers? I’ll help.”

Moon controlled the urge to leap forward and rip Nobent’s head off. The fear of Fell had dogged him most of his life. All Fell were shapeshifters, all had black scales, and Fell rulers strongly resembled Raksuran consorts. It didn’t help that once Moon had thought he might be a Fell, for a brief and self-destructive time that he was still paying for, all these turns later. His voice tight, he said, “If I were a Fell, I’d take your help and eat you anyway. Tell me about the sea-goers.”

Nobent settled into his mossy bed and his branches relaxed a little. “The sea-goers don’t come here. They’re afraid of the forest.” With an air of injured dignity, he volunteered, “The Kek trade their rushes and edivine to me, and I trade it to the sea-goers.”

That wasn’t helpful, though it explained why the Kek didn’t know much about what lay further out to sea. And if the sea-goers were afraid of the forest Reaches, it might be because they knew about the Raksuran colonies. “But other groundlings come to this shore, other traders?”

“Maybe.” Nobent seemed uninterested, and it was the first time in the conversation that Moon felt the waterling was being honest. “Not in a long time. There’s nothing here for them.”

“What about the far side of the sea? Do groundlings live there?”

“Probably.” Nobent leaned forward, eyes widening. “You want the seagoers.”

“Do they live in that direction?” Moon pointed with the tip of his right wing.

“Sometimes. They move around.” Nobent was more interested in his own questions. “What do you want them for? Nobent can help you, whatever you want to do to them.”

Moon couldn’t imagine what form Nobent’s “help” would take, and he didn’t want to. He countered with, “What do you trade for from the sea-goers?”

For some reason, that one made Nobent more cagey than ever. Moon asked more questions about the sea-goers, about what they looked like, why they moved around. Nobent’s answers were so

cryptic it quickly became obvious that he had no intention of imparting the information. Moon decided to let it go, at least for now. He had found out what he really needed to know: there were groundlings living out on the sea at the point where the mentors' map said the seed lay. Nobent couldn't travel very fast, and now that Moon had his scent, he would be easy to track down again.

He stood, abruptly enough that Nobent sloshed backward again. With a somewhat nervous sneer, Nobent said, "You're leaving? Too bad."

"It's getting late, and I'm hungry." Moon cocked his head, letting the meaning sink in. He didn't usually threaten to eat people, but he was having difficulty classifying Nobent as "people." "I might be back."

He walked up the pier to rejoin Khitah and Chime. "Good?" Khitah asked.

"Good," Moon told him. "Thank you."

They started back into the green shadows and sweet scents of the Kek city, a relief after the miasma that hung over the water traveler. Chime looked back over his shoulder, frowning. "That was odd. What did it tell you?"

"Not much." Moon was certain Nobent had been lying, or obfuscating, for some reason. But it was some confirmation that they were in the right place, that the map hadn't led them astray. "We'll have to see what Stone finds."



It was dusk by the time they returned to the camp on the tree branch and found that Jade and Balm were already back. They had found ruins along the shore too, but no Kek and no evidence of recent groundling habitation. Vine reported that his afternoon had been uneventful. "Flower slept the whole time," he said. "I think she needed the rest."

Flower, fidgeting around as if having trouble finding a comfortable spot on the branch, gave him an irritable glare. "No one cares what you think," she told him.

Vine said wryly, "I noticed that."

Chime handed her a pack to lean against. "Are you all right?" She hissed at him. "I'm fine."

No one was hungry enough to hunt again yet, so there was nothing

to do but wait for Stone. The branch was more than wide enough for them all to sprawl on comfortably, and through the leaves they had a good view of the seashore. During the afternoon, Vine and Flower had built a little hearth: one layer of flat, water-smoothed rocks to insulate the wood, and a second smaller layer that Flower had spelled for heat, so she could warm water for tea.

The air was fragrant in the gathering twilight, scented with the flowers of the field and the leaves of their tree. The nightbirds and treelings and insects sang and hummed, and Moon tried to listen to the others talk and not be rabidly impatient for Stone to appear.

After darkness settled over the shore, Balm took the watch and they tried to sleep. Moon lay with his head pillowed on Jade's stomach, wide awake. He didn't realize he was tapping his fingers on his chest until her hand closed over his. She said softly, "It's not a long flight for Stone."

"I know." He made his hand relax. "Still."

Nearby, Chime said, "Pearl will know by now. I wonder... I mean, what will she do? Besides send someone after us."

Jade snorted, quietly. "I think we know what she'll do."

Just past Chime, Vine groaned.

Moon finally dozed off at some point, only to wake abruptly some time later, when someone said, "He's back!"

Moon sat up and startled Jade awake. It was still dark but he could tell from the quality of the air that it wasn't long before dawn. Vine had taken Balm's place at watch and Moon scrambled forward to his side.

A darker shape hung against the starlit sky: Stone, flying back toward the shore.

By the time Stone reached them, everyone was awake. Flower was the only one who had slept heavily. Still bleary with it, she filled their kettle from the waterskin and put it on the hearth to heat.

Stone was just a big dark shadow as he landed on the end of the branch. The wood shivered with his weight, then went still as he shifted to his groundling form. He walked up the branch toward them, and Moon wished they had been able to camp on the ground, or anywhere else where they could have made a real fire. The heating rocks didn't give off light and he wanted to see Stone's expression.

Stone stopped a few paces away, and said, flatly, "I couldn't find it."

Jade stirred a little, and Moon knew she had just controlled the urge to hiss in disappointment. Chime shook his head, confused. "The seed? But—"

"The island," Stone corrected. He sat down, moving slowly, and Moon heard his bones creak. "There's nothing out there. I spent most of the night flying a spiral, looking for land." He rubbed his eyes. "What I'm afraid of is that these groundlings were on a boat that sank."

"Or the island moved," Moon said. Suddenly some of the things Nobent had told him made a lot more sense.

Even in the dark, Moon could tell that Stone was giving him a look that would have sent most of the warriors skittering for cover. But there was more life in his voice when he said, "What?"

Moon told him, "We found a Kek settlement, and talked to a waterling trader. It said there were groundlings called 'sea-goers' who lived on the water and moved around." He told the rest of it, with Chime inserting more details.

"That might explain it," Jade said. "If we knew how these sea-goers were moving, it would help."

Vine shrugged. "They could be on boats, or they could have a flying island."

"If they have a flying island, it must be moving fairly fast," Chime countered. "Too fast."

"That's right." Flower sounded thoughtful. "It moved out of Stone's range in only seven days. Flying islands drift slowly with the wind. Unless there was a big storm, and we've seen no sign of one, it would still be in the area. It's more likely to be a boat."

"Or a fleet of boats," Moon added.

"Maybe." Jade scratched her claws on the wood, thinking it over. "How does the water traveler find them?"

"That's... I don't know," Chime said slowly. "It has to be scent, doesn't it?"

"Something in the water." Moon shook his head. "The sea-goers leave a trail, somehow."

Stone sounded weary. "We'll figure that out when we get there. You all know how we're getting there, right?"

"An augury?" Vine asked, turning to Flower.

"No, we don't need an augury," Moon said before she could reply.

He smiled. Old Nobent was going to help them after all. “We’ll follow the water traveler.”

Chapter Eight

Once everyone had agreed on a plan, Moon and Chime flew immediately toward the Kek city, following the dark line of the shore. The others were to follow later, after leaving a marker for

whoever might be coming after them from Indigo Cloud. Stone, who would be doing the biggest share of the tracking once Nobent set out, needed to sleep before he started another long flight.

Before they left, Flower had asked, "If this creature does lead you to the sea-goers, do you have any idea what to look for?"

"Besides the seed?" Moon had to admit she had him there. "No."

Flower sighed and rubbed her forehead. "You'll need something to go on besides that. I'll augur again."

Chime frowned at her. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Flower stared hard at him. "Yes."

After they had taken flight away from the camp, Moon asked Chime, "Why didn't you think Flower should augur?"

"She hasn't been looking well," Chime replied, slipping sideways in an unexpected air current. "I just have a bad feeling about it."

Moon hoped he was wrong. Flower's augury was the only thing that had gotten them this far.

When they drew near the Kek city, Moon tipped a wing at Chime. Chime broke off and flew into the deeper shadows under the trees. Moon turned toward the city.

There were a few smudge pots and lights lit in the lower levels; by the smell they were using some kind of nut oil. Several lamps hung on the outer edge of the dock area Nobent occupied.

Moon had debated approaching underwater, and decided against it. He didn't know what kind of senses Nobent had for detecting prey in the water, and it was best not to find out the hard way. He was pretty certain he could take Nobent in a fight, but that wouldn't get him what he wanted.

He circled the city, playing the cool damp wind against his wings,

dropping lower and slowing until he could catch the side of a hivetower. He heard a slight stirring of movement through the woven reed wall, and a sleepy squeak, but no one gave the alarm. He climbed down the wall head first, found the heavier support for the half-roof that hung out over the dock, and eased out onto it.

This close to the piers and the surface of the water, he could scent Nobent's rank odor, but it wasn't nearly as strong as it had been before. Taking a chance, Moon crawled to the end of the roof and hung his head down over the edge.

The dock area was lit by three hanging lamps, the wan light showing him the empty pier where Nobent had rested. *Huh. Maybe he left as soon as we were out of sight.* That was a little odd. If Nobent only wanted to take his next cargo of edilvine and rushes to the sea-goers, he should have waited until morning. His eyes hadn't had the appearance of a nocturnal being's.

He could be rushing off to tell the sea-goers that Raksura were searching for them, but Moon didn't think Nobent could know about the theft. Nobent hadn't recognized Moon as a Raksura, hadn't seemed to know about the courts inhabiting the forest. But maybe the sea-goers were interested in anyone who asked about their whereabouts. *That's a good sign we're looking in the right place.*

Moon straightened up and pushed off the roof to catch the wind. He swept down low over the water, only ten or twelve paces above it. He cast back and forth over the sea in front of the city twice before he caught Nobent's scent again, traces of it carried by the constant breeze blowing in off the water. It gave him a direction and a faint trail to follow.

He swooped up again and curved over the city. Chime, watching from the forest, arched up out of the canopy to meet him. Moon twisted into a tight circle, matched Chime's slower speed, and said, "He's left already. I'm going to follow. Tell Stone to go northwest."

"Northwest," Chime repeated. "Be careful. Don't go too far!" Like all good advice, Moon didn't think he was going to have much chance to follow it. He banked away and headed out to sea.



Moon flew low over the water, following Nobent's scent on the wind. He lost it twice in crosswinds while it was still dark, and had to cast back and forth only a few paces above the water to pick it up again. After that he slowed his flight, going more carefully.

When the shore was far behind him, a dark band barely visible in

the night, he realized this was the first time he had been really alone in... he had lost count of the days. Except for the day and night when he had tracked the kethel to the Dwei hive, he had been with other Raksura since Stone had found him in the Cordans' valley. He had been alone for turns before that, for most of his life, isolated even when he was living with groundlings. It was strange how quickly he had gotten used to constant companionship.

The sky began to streak with dawn, the light reflecting off long fingers of cloud, lightening the water to a crystalline blue. Moon was only about ten paces above the waves when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, a shape under the surface. Concentrating on the scent, he reacted by instinct before the thought even formed. He twisted away just as something lashed up at him from below. It brushed his wing, hard enough to knock him sideways.

Badly startled, Moon flapped wildly through the spray, shooting upward as fast as he could. He looked down in time to see a white shape, an arm with a clawed hand, sinking slowly down below the waves. The palm was at least two paces across. Moon swore, gained some more height and caught the wind again. He could see a dim outline just below the crystal surface, something pale sinking out of sight.

That was... exciting, Moon thought, his heart pounding as he corrected his wobbly flight. At least he was wide awake now.

After that he was a lot more careful about his distance above the water.

Clouds moved in to paint the sky with gray, but there was no smell of rain yet. He caught up with Nobent about mid-morning, and swept up high into the air so there was no chance of the water traveler spotting him. Nobent swam determinedly northwest, his branches open around him like a big ugly gray flower. Whatever he was paddling with was hidden by the tendrils of his mat.

Nobent moved at a good pace for a water creature or a rowboat, but not for a Raksura. Moon was able to glide after him, riding the wind. He couldn't see Nobent's destination yet, though far ahead there were drifts of mist near the surface that might obscure a small island or fleet of large watercraft. If the sea-goers lived too far away, the warriors wouldn't be able to make the flight.

Moon kept looking back, hoping to see Stone. When the sun was directly overhead, casting great cloud-shadows on the crystal-blue sparkle of the water, he was rewarded with a dark shape moving rapidly toward him. *Finally,* he thought. At least this part of their plan

had worked.

Stone must have spotted Moon because he curved upward and vanished in the clouds. Moon shot up to meet him.

He passed up through the cold fog of a cloud and emerged in brilliant sunlight to find Stone circling overhead. "What took you so long?" Moon called to him.

Stone never spoke in his Raksuran form, so Moon was fairly sure he wouldn't dignify that with an answer. Stone just rumbled and tapped his chest with one claw.

"I'm coming." Moon hated being carried, but he wasn't staying back here, plodding along after Nobent. He flew up to Stone, matched his pace, then grabbed onto Stone's outstretched arm. Shouting to be heard over the wind, he said, "There's waterlings as big as major kethel hunting this sea. I don't know how Nobent survives." Possibly he smelled too bad for anything to want to eat him.

Stone grunted thoughtfully. Moon pulled his wings in and folded them tight against his back, then climbed up Stone's arm to hook his claws into the big scales across his chest. Stone reached up and closed a hand around him, holding Moon securely. Then they shot forward over the clouds.

□

At Stone's speed, following the direction that Nobent had taken, it wasn't long before Moon saw the outline of an island. It was a series of seven rising hills in a half circle, and it was inhabited. He could see the glitter of reflected sunlight on the regular shapes of tall octagonal towers. Stone gained altitude, skirting the bottom of the clouds to lessen the chance of anyone looking up and spotting them.

This wasn't what I was expecting, Moon thought, as Stone tilted his wings to slow his flight. Maybe this was the sea-goers' home port, and they had fast-moving vessels to travel in. *They used something to move the seed away from the spot where the mentors saw it. They didn't...* Moon stiffened, eyes widening. *What in the Three Worlds...*

They were close enough now to look down on the island, to see that it wasn't an island.

The seven low hills formed a half circle, and were completely covered with the stone buildings of the groundling city. But the water was so clear Moon could see what was just under the surface. From one end of the island a long curving tail stretched out, tipped with giant fins. On each coast were three massive flippers, angled down to vanish in the blue depths. And at the other end, a huge triangular

head, tilted down so only the brow ridge just below the waves was visible.

Above Moon's head, Stone hissed incredulously. Moon echoed the sentiment. He couldn't believe that groundlings had managed this. But there was the city, mostly composed of towers and bridges and raised plazas, as if built to stand as high above the surface of the creature as possible. He could see the sparkle of fountains, people moving on the bridges between towers. There was even a harbor, formed by the curve of one haunch, with sailing vessels docked in it. *They could have the seed.* A creature this size could have easily swum the distance between the point the mentors had augured and here in only a few days.

Moon looked up, though all he could see was the scaled underside of Stone's neck. "We need to talk to Nobent again."

Stone must have agreed. He banked away and headed back toward the shore.



"While it sleeps, anyone can approach. When it wakes, it moves." Nobent sunk down further into his mat, his knobby brow furrowed in sullen dismay. "That's all Nobent knows."

"That's not what Nobent told us earlier," Moon pointed out. "Nobent's memory has improved."

Nobent sniffed self-righteously. "You didn't ask Nobent the right questions."

It was evening, the sun setting over the sea, and they stood on the forest beach, just out of sight of the Kek city. Stone had acquired Nobent by scooping him out of the sea with his free hand, and had flown back here at his best speed. They had told the others what they had found and, with difficulty, had gotten them past the initial "groundling city on a giant water monster" shock. Now they were trying to decide what to do and how to do it.

Flower was the only one not present. The warriors had built a small blind up on one of the mountain-tree branches, and she was inside it, sleeping. Chime had said she had been exhausted again after the augury and had spent most of the day asleep.

Jade cocked her head, watching Nobent, not hiding her skepticism. "And you say if we land on this thing, in the dark, it won't react to us."

Nobent eyed her nervously. "As long as it's sleeping."

“Do we seriously believe that?” Vine asked, waving a hand in frustration. “A giant water beast isn’t going to notice if we land on it?”

Nobent grimaced. “It doesn’t notice Nobent. Fools. Groundlings come all the time in ships. How could the groundlings live on it if it ate them?”

“How do they find it?” Chime asked pointedly. “If it moves?”

“They have a special magic. Or they ask a water traveler.” Nobent sat up a little, sulky and contemptuous. “Ask, not snatch up off the sea.”

“And how often do they get eaten?” Balm asked, her expression grim. “It doesn’t eat them!” Nobent snarled. “Nobent is not stupid!”

“If you’re lying,” Stone said, his voice even and thoughtful, “I’ll find you. There’s nowhere I can’t find you.”

If the threat had been directed at him, Moon would have found it very effective. Apparently Nobent did, too. The water traveler huddled, eyes widening with real terror. “Not lying,” he said in a small voice.

Jade hissed and turned away to walk up the beach. Stone went after her. “Watch him,” Moon told the three warriors, and followed.

They stopped out of earshot, in the shadow of a stray sapling mountain-tree that overhung the beach.

Keeping her voice low, Jade said, “When Flower augured this morning, she saw a metal ship. She said it would lead you to the seed. Did you see anything like that?”

“No. But we weren’t looking closely at the harbor,” Stone told her. “When we go back, we’ll know where to start.”

Jade looked up the beach, her brow furrowed. “Someone will have to stay behind with Flower. It would be good to have a mentor along, but she’s just not up to it. I’ve never seen an ordinary augury affect her like that.”

Moon glanced up at the shelter. He hoped Flower wasn’t ill. Since leaving the old colony, they had all been on one long journey after another, and there had been no time for anyone to rest.

Stone followed his gaze. “She’s pushed herself too hard.” He turned to Jade again. “It’s a long day’s flight for a warrior, but if this thing moves further out to sea, they’d be stuck there. I couldn’t carry all of them. The best option is to let me go alone.”

“With me.” Moon couldn’t keep his mouth shut any longer. “I

know more about groundlings than any of you. I know how to blend in.”

“He’s not wrong,” Stone admitted.

“I know that.” Jade shook out her spines, obviously unhappy with their lack of options. “But we’re taking a chance that we won’t need them to help fight when we find the damn thing.”

Jade had clearly assumed she was going with them. Nobody appeared to have seen the problem with that. Moon said, “Jade, the thieves know what Raksura look like. They’ve seen the carvings in the colony tree. Even in your Arbora form, they’ll recognize what you are.”

She hissed, her expression turning sour. But she didn’t try to argue the point. “So we’re leaving me behind, then.”

“Yes.” At her glare, he added, “We can’t help it.”

Jade turned to Stone. “Before you leave, take Nobent off somewhere he can’t cause trouble.” Grimly determined, she added, “If you’re not back in three days, we’re coming after you.”

“Fair enough,” Stone said. Moon thought, *If we’re not back in three days, we’ll probably need the help.*



Stone took Nobent some distance along the shore to the south and dropped him off. It would take him days and days to make his way back toward the sea-goers’ island, the hope being that he would be too smart to try to go there immediately. After that, Moon and Stone rested and fed, then left in the early afternoon. They could go more quickly this time, at Moon’s fastest pace, timing their flight to reach the city just after dark.

By the time the sun set, they could see the city’s lights in the distance, dimmed by the heavy mist hanging over it. As they reached it, Stone broke off to circle and Moon dropped down for a closer view than he had gotten before.

The city was mostly composed of towers that rose up the flanks of the giant creature and thickly crowded along its hilly spine. There were big ones, octagonal with domed roofs, and smaller round ones. Light shone sporadically from windows and on the plazas and bridges. There were glass and metal lamps, on poles or hanging from chains, filled with a vapor that gave off a white illumination. There were no streets, just stairways and walkways, wreathed in mist. Some of the towers were topped with elaborate structures, domed roofs, smaller turrets, and colonnades with wide terraces overlooking the city. Some

were brightly lit and occupied.

The illusion that this was just another groundling city was broken by the heavy, damp musk in the air—the scent of a huge, unimaginably huge, water creature.

Moon flew in close to a larger tower, catching hold of a lower ledge and climbing up. From the top he heard voices, and a thread of music from stringed instruments. He reached the stone railing and lifted himself up just enough to peek over the edge.

Past the terrace, through the heavy columns supporting the dome, Moon could see a large group of groundlings, talking, laughing, moving amid low fountains and tall potted trees. They were dressed in flowing robes in brilliant colors, the fabrics translucent or catching metallic glints in the light. Heavy lanterns hung from chains, wrought into elaborate shapes of fish and sea creatures. The groundlings held goblets of pure crystalline glass in rich colors. Moon wouldn't have thought living on a giant monster would be so lucrative.

He spotted four different races immediately; Nobent hadn't lied about that at least. One group was tall and willowy, with dark skin and darker hair. Another was a weathered gold color, with long golden hair. The largest group by far had light blue skin, with knobby, pearl-like lumps on top of their skulls. The ones who seemed to be servants, who moved among the others with gold metal trays of food and drinks, were all shorter, with gray-green scaly skin and boney crests that looked like fish fins.

Moon pushed away from the railing, dropped down, and spread his wings. He caught the wind and turned toward the harbor.

He landed on a conical roof to get a better view of the half-circle of the harbor. Ships lay several levels below, tied up to long floating pontoon piers. Past them a great barrier ridge loomed, tapering away to vanish under the waves. Knowing it was the leg of the giant creature beneath them made the skin under Moon's scales creep. Looking at the towers and other stone and metal structures made it easier not to think about what was below you. The leg was very... obvious.

The dock itself was narrow, built against the rising slope of the creature's side. Multiple stairways led down from the crowded huddle of buildings perched just below the city proper, lit by the vapor-lamps. They had to be warehouses, provisioners, places where the ships could be hired or cargos sold. Below them, big metal scaffolds clung to the slope, hanging out over the water. They supported what looked like metal cradles, which Moon found bizarre, until he spotted one that

held a small fishing boat nestled in its grip. The smaller boats must be cranked up out of the water with the cradles, probably to protect them when the monster moved.

No one was around on this end of the docks. A few people climbed the stairs at the far end. The buildings along here all looked oddly off center, as if their foundations were unsteady and they were about to tumble off their perches. Considering what they were built on, their foundations probably did move periodically. Presumably the giant towers were built on more stable footing.

Moon leapt lightly down to the walkway and shifted to groundling. Immediately the mist was clammy on his skin, even through the tough material of his shirt. The metal surface of the walkway was cold under his feet. The trade-off was that the heavy odors of monster and fouled water and dead fish wasn't nearly as overwhelming. He took the first set of stairs, then worked his way down from walkway to walkway under the scaffolding, until he could step out onto the somewhat wider dock.

The green metal was rusty in places and puddles of water had collected in the worn spots. The vapor-lights were suspended on curving metal poles, the top of each one ornamented with a goggle-eyed fish head. The side of the monster was like a cliff stretching up from the water, the skin greenish and patterned with giant scales, crusted with little clumps of barnacle-like creatures. Moon stared at it in unwilling disgusted fascination. He couldn't see how these people could live like this.

He tore his gaze away from the monster's skin and walked down the dock, away from the fishers' scaffolds, toward the bigger trading ships. The area wasn't as uninhabited as it had appeared from a distance; the bundle of rags against a piling was a groundling, sleeping deeply. Another group of groundlings were in a shack built back against the cliff, having a desultory conversation. A few others moved around on the deck of a ship ahead, and some carried casks down into the hold. All the ships were wooden vessels, their sails furled or folded down. They were large and small, some plain and some painted, some with carved designs along the hulls. He could pick out the acrid scent of tar, and the wet weedy odor of the fibers used to make the ropes.

Then he moved past a large sailing vessel and saw a ship docked by itself, at a pontoon pier that stretched further out from the others. The vapor-lights caught the gleam of coppery metal on its tall hull. *There we go.* Moon walked to the edge of the dock.

The metal ship was about two hundred paces long, but it was much wider than the sailing vessels. There were multiple decks above

its bulbous hull, enough to make it look top heavy, and it had three wide chimneys across its width. It was also easily big enough to make a long sea crossing to the Reaches, and to carry a large party of groundlings and the supplies they would need to make the trek into the forest on foot. *This has to be it.*

It was dark, no lights showed in any windows or doors, and no one was out on the decks. The groundlings aboard must be sleeping soundly inside.

Moon turned away and walked down the dock toward the darker end, away from the vapor-lights. He sensed something big fly overhead, just out of range of the lights, and knew Stone had seen the ship as well. When Moon reached a shadowy spot, he ducked down, shifted, and slipped over the edge of the dock into the cool water.

Swimming in the dark, knowing what lived in these waters, was a nerve-racking experience. He stayed near the hulls of the other craft and worked his way back toward the metal ship. At least the water was fairly clean. The harbor area must get sluiced every time the creature moved, so it didn't have much time to collect layers of garbage and filth like other groundling ports.

He reached the metal ship's hull, and swam along until he found a boarding ladder on the side facing away from the dock. He climbed up onto the wide deck and paused to shake the water off his scales. Instead of wood, it was plated with narrow strips of copper metal. He listened for a long moment, and tasted the air, but there was no hint of movement, no scent of nearby groundlings.

There was a faint splash against the hull below, then Stone in groundling form climbed up the ladder, his clothes dripping on the copper deck.

Moon found a hatch, a heavy door with a thick crystal porthole. It opened into a wide interior corridor, dark except for what little light came through the doorway. It was lined with fine dark wood, with bright metal sconces holding white crystal globes for lamps. It was also utterly silent, and smelled faintly of must.

It felt empty, and Moon's heart sunk. He had hoped the groundlings would be aboard, that they could surprise them, get the seed, and be flying back to the others before dawn. Obviously coming to the same conclusion, Stone made a low-voiced frustrated snarl. He stepped past Moon and moved down the corridor.

They found a doorway that turned into the darker interior. Stone stopped to fish in his pack and pulled out a small cloth bundle. As he unwrapped it, light glowed. It was a little beach rock spelled to make

light, one of two that he had gotten from Flower before they left. He handed Moon the other one and they followed the passage inward.

About midway through the ship, the corridor opened into a living area. It had deep cushioned couches and bookcases with clear glass doors, and a white porcelain stove painted with delicate flowers and vines. Moon saw a book left out on one of the couches, and picked it up. It had a leather binding, and delicate paper printed with even rows of characters. He couldn't read the language, and there weren't any pictures. He put it back on the seat and stepped over to touch the stove, just to make certain, but it was cold.

He looked at Stone. "No one's been here for a long time."

Stone grunted an acknowledgement. "Maybe they left the seed. Look everywhere."

They searched, opening every door, every cabinet, looking into every cubby. The cabins meant for sleeping had beds built into the wall, and cabinets for storage, so there were a lot of doors and cubbies to investigate. It didn't help that many of them were still filled with possessions. Clothing made of heavy fabrics, leather boots and shoes, more books in unfamiliar languages, some printed and some handwritten, strange tools that Moon couldn't guess the purpose of. Everything was as rich as the living area, with fine wood, polished metal, painted ceramic sconces over the lights. There were tiny rooms for bathing, the walls covered with painted ceramic, with basins for the water to be piped into.

Moon found a room that was meant for preparing food, with a long table and chairs, and a larger stove of metal. The cabinets there held white pottery dishes, and metal cooking pots and utensils, and containers of flour, salt, and other dry foodstuffs he couldn't identify. Some of it had been sitting long enough to get moldy. There was a bowl on the table, filled with fruit so old it had turned into desiccated husks. Moon poked it thoughtfully, trying to estimate the age. *Six changes of the month, maybe seven?* Stone walked in, saw it, growled, and walked out again.

Down below there were strange rooms filled with machinery, all of it cold and silent. One of the rooms held blocks of a mineral, with a scent and texture not unlike the one used as fuel for light and warmth in the Turning City, back in the eastern mountains. Moon assumed the blocks were used to make the ship move, somehow. But searching those areas told them nothing except that the seed wasn't hidden there. They found signs that the crew had left abruptly but meant to return: a jacket tossed over a chair, tools scattered on the floor in front of one of the machines, a writing book left out on a table with a

wooden pen and an open ink bottle. The beds all had blankets and cushions, some tumbled as if the occupants had just gotten up.

They ended their search in the bridge at the very top of the ship. It was round, with big windows giving a nearly panoramic view of the harbor. They had to wrap their lights up again to keep the glow from being seen from the docks, so they had to search the large area by starlight.

Not that there was much here to search. There was a brass-bound wheel for steering and other devices Moon didn't recognize, and papers covered with unintelligible writing strewn carelessly around. Some of them had been stepped on and torn or stained with dirt.

In the center of the room was a narrow, waist-high pillar of polished wood, the top formed into a heavy glass hexagon. It reminded Moon of the mechanism that steered the Golden Islanders' flying ships, but there was nothing inside it and there was no handle to steer with.

Stone hissed in frustration. "The damn seed isn't here."

"It's the only thing that isn't here." Moon straightened up from peering into the bottom of the empty pillar. "They left food behind, and their books, their writings, clothing. If they left voluntarily, they meant to come back."

"Or somebody came aboard and killed them." Stone shook his head and paced to the window that looked out at the harbor and the misty city rising above it. "And took the seed away somewhere. Flower didn't say the seed was on the ship, just that the ship would lead us to it."

Moon scratched the back of his neck, thinking it over. "But somebody still pays to keep this ship here."

Stone turned back, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"Trading ports don't let ships dock for free." He had heard enough captains and sailors complain about this in the trading cities along the Crescent Coast to know it was a fairly universal practice. "Somebody has to own the pier, or be paying for the ship to stay here. And what about when the monster moves? The bigger ships can't just be dragged along, they'd get damaged. Somebody has to sail this one. Or tow it."

Stone turned to look out toward the city again. "So somebody must come down here to keep an eye on it."

They wanted something fairly dramatic, something that would catch attention quickly. Setting the ship on fire was the first thing that occurred to them, but that might rouse the whole harbor. So Stone climbed down the hull again, slipped underwater and shifted, and used his claws to snap the heavy cable at the ship's bow.

Moon swam back to the docks, climbed a piling, and slunk through the dark to crouch among stacks of casks and boxes waiting to be loaded. Once his scales dried, he shifted to groundling and settled in to wait.

The ship was still attached to the pier by a few lighter lines and a cable in the stern, but without the bow cable it soon swung out from the pier and drifted sideways. It was a potential hazard to the big sailing vessel docked at the next pier, and it didn't go unnoticed.

After some time, the groundling who guarded the deck of the sailing ship passed by that side, stopped, and stared for a moment, then hurried away. Soon he was back with more groundlings. Two of them went down the gangplank to their pier and crossed over to the buildings just above the dock.

More groundlings came out to look, then went down the pier. They brought out a small boat and readied lighter cables to fasten the ship back to the pier again. Moon cursed wearily. It looked like the dockworkers were going to deal with the situation without summoning the ship's owner.

The lights and noise woke the crews sleeping on the ships nearby, and they started to come down onto the dock to watch. They were mostly of the dark and golden groundling races that Moon had seen in the top of the tower, though they were all dressed like sailors, in pants, shirts, and vests of rough cloth and leather. There were no blue-pearl people, and none of the sea-people with the grayish scales and head crests. Moon got up, wove his way through the forest of crates, and slipped into the crowd.

One thing Moon had wanted to find out, while it was still dark out and they were in a spot relatively easy to escape, was what the reaction would be to his and Stone's groundling forms. It looked like the people here were used to seeing a variety of groundling races, but you could never be too certain. He had been in situations where a settlement had seemed to welcome a large number of diverse races, only to find out that his groundling form looked just enough like their hereditary enemies.

But while some of these people glanced at him, no one seemed to find his appearance shocking. Several were having an annoyed

conversation in Kedaic, mostly about the stupidity of whoever had tied up the ship.

Moon took a chance and said in the same language, “Who does it belong to?”

Without looking around, an older woman with weathered golden skin said, “It’s been there a long time.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Most of the turn, I think.”

One of the dark-skinned men said, “At least. It belongs to Magnate Ardan.”

Someone off to the side said in a thicker accent, “Does it? I thought it was farcoast traders brought it here.”

Another woman shrugged. “Maybe they sold it to him. His emblem is on the pier.”

“Ah, you’re probably right, then.”

There was a pause, as everyone was distracted by two of the small boats almost blundering into each other.

“Magnate Ardan?” Moon repeated, hoping that was enough to get them started again. He didn’t want to say too much or show particular interest. They didn’t need any rumors spreading about the funny-looking stranger asking questions about Magnate Ardan’s ship. “I didn’t know he was a trader,” someone said.

“I don’t know that he is.” The gold woman turned to point. “He has that tower, right up there. The one with the gold turret.”

Chapter Nine

Once the metal ship had been secured again, the excitement died down and everyone wandered back to their ships or the dock buildings. Moon lingered, just in case the ship's owner belatedly appeared, but finally gave in.

He took the first stair upward, where it wound up among platforms braced atop the knobs and swellings in the monster's side. As the stairs curved inward, he saw someone standing on the platform above, under the vapor-light, waiting for him. It was Stone, radiating impatience.

"Well?" Stone asked, as Moon reached the platform.

"It didn't work like we thought."

"I noticed."

Moon ignored that in the interest of not spending the rest of the night

fighting. "I heard the other crews talking. They think the ship belongs to somebody called Magnate Ardan. He lives up there." He jerked his head up toward the tower, the gold top barely visible from this angle.

Stone turned to look. Then he hissed out a breath and started up the stairs. "That's going to be a problem."

Following him, Moon agreed. They had a whole tower to search now, and it would probably be occupied by a large number of groundlings.

And they didn't know for certain that the seed was there, just that this Ardan now owned the ship, so he must know what had happened to the crew.

The steps twisted up through a heavily shadowed, unlit walkway. Stone kept walking, but Moon shifted and scaled the nearest wall, then climbed up to the rust-streaked metal roof of the house that overhung the walkway.

He had a better view from here. Above the crowded buildings overlooking the dock, the walkways turned to narrow caverns,

winding their way past the feet of other towers, far smaller than those toward the center of the city. It was well past the middle of the night, and many of the lights had gone out. He didn't see much movement on the walkways and bridges in this area, either.

He could understand why groundlings might be reluctant to venture out into the night. The mist had sunk into the low spots of the city, the walkways and lower platforms, so heavy it obscured everything but the brightest lights. Unless these people had a Raksuran-like sense of direction, they could easily become lost in their own city. He sprang up from the roof, spreading his wings to catch the strong wind, and turned toward the city's central ridge and Ardan's tower.

It loomed out of the misty dark, a tall octagonal structure with a domed roof of green-tinged copper topped by a slender gold spire. But there were no open terraces and balconies like the other big towers. He flew closer, slipping sideways in to make a wide circle around it. There were windows, narrow arches set deeply back into the heavily carved façade, but they all seemed to be covered by metal shutters. *That's not helpful.* He had hoped to at least get a glimpse of the inhabitants—

He slammed into something and the stunning blow sent him spinning away. Dazed, he plunged down, falling toward the rooftops. He struggled to extend his wings, then managed to roll out of the dizzying tumble and caught the air just in time to break his fall.

Moon glided down, then dropped onto a slanted rooftop. He hooked his claws in the slate shingles as he folded his wings and pulled them in protectively. The skin under his scales tingled, as if he had fallen into something acidic. He shook his spines out with an angry rattle, but he wasn't sure who he was more mad at, himself or the damn groundlings.

Still shaken, he crept to the edge of the roof, climbed down to a lower rooftop, and finally down a wall to a walkway cloaked in mist. There, he shifted to groundling. The sudden change in sensation made him stumble; the tingling was worse, like being bitten all over by firebugs. And he had a headache.

Snarling under his breath, he found his way through the narrow caverns of the walkways. The damp air seemed to congeal on his skin, weighing his clothes down. He crossed a bridge over a mist-wreathed chasm and came out onto the open plaza at the base of the tower.

Two bridges led off from the plaza and several stairways wound up and away from it amid the smaller buildings clustered around.

Vapor-lights hung from arches and eaves over some of the ground-floor doorways. The doors were all sealed, except for one. It was off the second landing of a stairway, and was lit and open; piping music came from it, and an occasional muffled voice.

From this angle, the tower itself looked even more like a blocky, windowless fortress. The entrance was large but sealed with heavy ironbound doors and there was a big vapor-light mounted on each side.

The plaza wasn't uninhabited. Moon immediately sensed movement down several of the byways. And Stone, still in groundling form, was just across the way, sitting back against the wall, near a bundle of rags. Swearing silently, Moon crossed over to him.

"So they don't want visitors," Stone said, apparently having decided to be unperturbed by this development.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking." Moon leaned on the wall and eased down to sit. The paving was gritty and smelled of mold. The shock of running into the tower's barrier had left him feeling every moment of all the days of long flights, tension, and little rest. "Who's that?"

The bundle of rags was peering around Stone, staring at Moon. Its eyes were big, dark, and slightly mad. It smelled like a groundling; based on the size, Moon was guessing one of the gray ones with the waterling scales and crest.

"This is Dari." Stone jerked his head to indicate his new groundling friend. "They threw him out of that wine bar up there."

"Halloo," Dari said, or something similar. Moon realized that Dari wasn't mad, but just very, very intoxicated.

A group of blue groundlings tumbled out of the wine bar's doorway, the vapor-light gleaming off their pearly skullcaps. They careened down the steps, talking loudly. Moon leaned his aching head back against the wall. "The crewmen were speaking Kedaic. They used a word I thought meant 'magnate,' but maybe it means 'magister.'" That would explain how the thieves had found the colony tree, why they had been so bent on getting the seed. If Ardan was a powerful groundling shaman, he could have wanted the seed for magic, used his powers to locate it, and sent the thieves after it. Moon just hoped Ardan hadn't noticed that something had flown into his damn magical barrier.

Stone said, dryly, "That would agree with Dari, who says a powerful magic-worker lives in that tower, and that everyone's afraid of him." Dari nodded emphatically.

Stone added, "I checked. That barrier goes all the way down to the pavement in front of the doors."

The drunken groundlings staggered across the plaza. Two spotted Moon and Stone, and broke off to rush aggressively toward them. Dari yelped and cowered.

When they were less than ten paces away, Stone growled, a low reverberation that Moon felt through the paving. The two groundlings stumbled to an abrupt halt and peered uncertainly. Groundling eyes often weren't as good in the dark as Raksuran, and they probably couldn't see much except three shapes sitting against the wall. They hesitated, wavering, then retreated, throwing uneasy looks back. They rejoined the rest of the group, which was making its way loudly and erratically across the plaza.

Dari made a noise of relief, pulled a pottery jug out of his rags, and drank deeply.

Stone waited until the groundlings had wandered out of sight, before he said, "He's had our seed most of a turn, depending on how long it took his thieves to get back through the forest. We need to get in there."

"But not tonight." Moon had had enough for now. They needed to rest, get more information about Ardan, then think of a way to get past the protective barrier. "Dari, show us where the nearest abandoned house is."



There were several not far away, a crowded huddle of houses around a dark octagonal tower. Dari pointed it out for them, then wandered off back toward the wine bar.

They made their way down a little alley that wove between the other buildings. It opened occasionally into small courtyards, barely thirty paces across. Moon could hear people sleeping in some of the houses, but others sounded empty. The odor of mold was worse here, almost as bad as the musky stench of the monster. The rock everything was built from seemed too strong to crumble, but the perpetual damp caused mold and mushroom-like plants to grow on it.

They came to the tower's base, and there was no mistaking the fact that it was abandoned; the entrance archway was bricked up.

Moon glanced around, making sure the houses overlooking this plaza had either blocked windows or blank walls. Then he shifted and jumped up onto the side of the tower.

The openings below the third floor had all been blocked up, the seams filled with layers of dirt and mold. He climbed up to the first open window. Stone flowed past him and disappeared into an opening on an upper floor. Moon slipped inside, scenting nothing but rot.

The room was large and high-ceilinged, the floor strewn with broken furniture mixed with shrouds of disintegrating fabric and rotted trash. It was too dark to make out the carving on the pillars and the walls. Moon explored, finding that the layout was fairly simple, with big rooms on each floor around a central staircase. Prowling around each level to make certain nothing else was living here, he kept stepping on odd indentations in the floor. They were small and round, and there were a lot of them. He wasn't sure what they were for, except to trip the unwary, until he found the rusted broken remnants of a metal clip in one. *Huh*, he thought, flicking the metal with a claw. They must be for anchoring down furniture, and anything else that might fall over when the leviathan moved.

There was also a big ceramic cistern on the fifth floor, filled by a pipe that ran out through the wall, and probably up to funnels on the roof. He opened the lid and sniffed cautiously. The water smelt stale, but not like anything had died in it.

Climbing up the stairwell, Moon wondered if the city wasn't as populated as it had looked at first. If the empty walkways and sporadic lights weren't a sign that the inhabitants were asleep, but a sign that many of them had long since left. The harbor had seemed well occupied by ships, if not crowded, but then with no room for crops or herds, the city must get all its food by trade and fishing.

He found Stone on the top floor, in a big room with two walls open to the wind and the night. Columns in the shape of groundling women supported the roof on that side, and a terrace with a high balustrade extended all the way around the tower. The weather had washed any debris down the stairs or back into the corners, so the cracked tile floor was almost clean.

Stone was in groundling form, sitting on the floor, digging through his old battered pack. Moon shifted to groundling too, and sat next to him, smothering a yawn. Stone pulled out a redfruit and offered it to him. Moon shook his head. He was a little queasy from his encounter with the barrier and he didn't think a sweet redfruit would help.

Tomorrow they would have to find food, as well as a way into the Magister's tower. They had some loose gems, sunstones from an old consort's bracelet of Stone's, brought along for him to wear at Emerald Twilight. Stone had refused to wear it, and apparently wasn't at all

reluctant to use it for trade.

Moon looked out into the dark sky, streaked with drifts of mist. *How do we get into that tower?* he wanted to ask. Instead he said, "If we can't get the seed back, where do we go?"

Stone contemplated the redfruit, then put it back in his pack. "We look for another colony."

"I know that." Moon scrubbed a hand through his hair, and told himself not to try to pick a fight with Stone. Exhaustion and impatience and growing despair weren't a good combination for this conversation. "Blossom said if we took another deserted colony, we could be attacked by other courts."

"Blossom's right." Stone pulled out his blanket. "They can accuse us of stealing territory and attack us for it, drive us out of the Reaches."

It sounded so wearily familiar to Moon. "Would they do that?"

"Yes. Emerald Twilight knows our situation. And if they know it, all the courts in the Reaches will know before the next turn. Some of them would be sure to decide that they don't want a vagabond Fell-cursed half-dead court wandering around taking territory that doesn't belong to it."

"So they'd treat us all like solitaires."

"Yes." Stone straightened the blanket, and moved around to lie down on it, grimacing as he settled himself on the hard tile. "The colony tree isn't just a place to live, it's our heritage, our bloodline, our right to take our place among the other courts." He patted the blanket. "Go to sleep."

Moon lay down next to Stone, twinges of pain in his back and shoulders making the process more difficult than usual. Even when he was settled comfortably, his thoughts chased in circles and it seemed a long time before he could sleep.

He woke just before dawn. He was lying on his stomach, and Stone was using his back and shoulder as a pillow. Stone was heavy but also very warm, a contrast to the damp cool of the morning. Moon just lay there for a moment; sleep had helped cure the exhaustion but not the impatience or the despair.

Reluctantly, Moon nudged Stone over and climbed to his feet to stretch. In the daylight he could see the walls were covered with splotches of peeling paint worn away by the weather, old murals too faded to make out. He went to the big window and leaned against the side, yawning, looking out into clouds of white mist, much heavier

now than it had been last night.

They would have to go through the city today, which meant talking to strange groundlings. He remembered he was still wearing his consort's gifts, the belt and knife, and the gold wristband. They weren't obvious, and the wristband was normally hidden by his shirtsleeve, but it didn't pay to take the chance. Groundlings who had been to the colony tree to steal might recognize the Arbora's designs. He took both off and tucked them into a handy chink in the wall.

He went out onto the terrace and stepped up onto the low balustrade. His toes hanging out over the precipitous drop, he looked out over the city again. The mist hung like a heavy blanket over the smaller houses around the tower, obscuring any view of the alleys, the walkways. Sound was muffled, but there wasn't much to hear: some distant clanking and banging from the direction of the port, the call of a food peddler. Any signs of movement or life were buried under the fog.

Moon decided to take a chance. He shifted and jumped off the balustrade, hard flaps taking him up until he could catch the wind.

He flew out past the edge of the mist, which clung to the edges of the giant island-monster but faded away over the open sea. He took a long circuit around the shoreline, just to see if anything had changed. No ships had put out yet, but he did see three shapes swimming toward the harbor: water travelers, plodding steadily over the waves. He didn't want to go any closer, but he was pretty certain Nobent wasn't one of them. If Nobent was foolish enough to head back here, it was going to take him a lot longer than a day to make the journey.

Moon turned away and headed for the opposite coast from the harbor. Once there, he went towards the long reef formed by the tail and dipped down to fly low over the water. He eyed the waves cautiously; he hadn't forgotten the large size of the predators, though he hoped the close proximity of the monster would keep them away. Perhaps it would attract some variety of suckerfish, the larger the better.

He found several, big gray ones about four paces long. They swam close to the surface near the tail, clustering in an area where, judging by the flotsam caught in the waves, the islanders must dump their garbage. He caught one, snatching it out of the water, and flew back to the tower with it.

When he dumped it onto the terrace, Stone sat up with a grunt of surprise. Moon told him, "That's yours," and flew back to get one for himself. The sky was lightening as the sun rose and, fog or not, flying

over the city would soon be too chancy.

By the time he got back with the second fish, Stone was gone. So was the first fish. Stone must have shifted to eat it because there was literally nothing left but a wet spot on the floor and a few stray scales. Moon ate his fish, leaving the bones, the scales, and sharp tail fins behind. He didn't have Stone's digestion.

He went down to the fifth floor and used water from the cistern to wash the guts off his claws, then stopped to listen. He could hear distant voices, including Stone's. *He would*, Moon thought, half wry and half bitter. Moon had always approached new groundlings cautiously, spending a few days observing them if possible before venturing to draw near. Stone apparently just sauntered into their camps and sat down. Shaking his head, Moon climbed out the window.

At the base of the tower, he shifted to groundling and followed the voices through the maze of alleys. Stone was in a little court, sitting on the paving with three groundlings. One had brought a metal brazier and from the smell, it was burning a fuel made from fish oil, unless that odor was coming from the clay pot set atop it. Two of the groundlings were the short fishy-gray variety, the third was larger with orange-tinted gold coloring, though his hair and beard had streaks of gray. All three wore gray and brown clothing, ragged and worn.

As Moon stepped into the court, the groundlings looked up, startled. Stone obviously hadn't told them he had brought a friend.

Ignoring the stares, Moon went to sit next to Stone. Stone nodded to the gold man, then to the gray groundlings, who were both female. "That's Enad, and Theri, and Rith. This is Moon."

Enad lifted his brows at Stone, saying, "Where did you say you were from?" He spoke Kedaic also, with a thick accent.

Stone, scraping tea into the steaming clay pot, didn't look up at him. "I didn't."

"We came on that trader ship," Moon said. Every ship of any size in the harbor had been a trader ship, and he didn't intend to be more specific. His travels had given him a lot of experience with how to appear to be willing to answer questions without actually answering them.

Enad nodded, his gaze flicking curiously from Moon to Stone and back. "The one from Bekenadu?" He didn't wait for an answer, turning to the two women. "Times are hard for traders, too."

Rith, the second gray groundling, regarded Moon skeptically. She looked older, and the blue-tinged gray of her skin was marked with creases, the scales at the base of her forehead crest turning white. “You’re traders?”

“No. When they stopped here, the traders upped the passage price.” Moon shrugged, leaving them to fill in the rest. Obviously traders would sleep on their ships, or pay for shelter near the harbor, and wouldn’t need to live in abandoned houses.

The skepticism faded and Rith nodded understanding. “There’s not much work here, except at the harbor.”

“Or the towers,” the younger one, Theri, said. Her mouth twisted. “But they’re particular about their servants.”

Stone caught her eye, and said, deadpan, “We’re not pretty enough?” His lips twitched in a smile.

She smiled back, laughing. “Too big, too...” She made a vague gesture.

“They like their servants to look helpless,” Rith added, rueful and bitter. “You look... not helpless.”

Enad nodded confirmation. He thumped himself in the chest. “Me, too.”

“All of them?” Moon asked. He hadn’t seriously considered taking work as a servant to get into Ardan’s tower, but it was a thought.

“All I’ve ever heard of,” Rith said. “Better to get work in the harbor.”

Enad began to elaborate on this, listing the various cargo factors he had worked for and how much coin they paid and what bastards they were. Moon considered how to turn the conversation back to the towers, then decided there was one question newcomers couldn’t fail to ask. When Enad stopped talking, Moon put in, “Who builds a city on a monster?”

All three sighed, and the two women exchanged weary looks. “Everyone asks that,” Theri explained.

Rith took up the story, cutting off Enad’s attempt to tell it. “Long ago, before we were all born, the leviathan slept in a cove, not far off the shore of Emriat-terrene. Great magisters held it with their magic and built this city on its back—no one knows why,” she put in to forestall the obvious question. “To show their power, maybe. They carried all the building stone and metal over on barges from the mines in Emriatterrene. They say the mountains were stripped to the bone

before they were done. But the turns went by and the rulers of Emriat-terrene were overthrown, rose again, were overthrown, and the magisters lost their skill, or much of it. The leviathan woke and swam away, taking the city with it.”

Moon exchanged a look with Stone, who lifted a brow and shrugged. He was right; it wasn’t the oddest thing either of them had heard.

Rith continued, “The magisters found ways to keep the city together. They gave the traders spelled direction-finders, so they could still find the city when the leviathan moves. They made a warning bell that tolls when the leviathan grows restless so the fishers know to come back to port and to lift their boats from the water, and the traders know to cast off.”

Moon read the resignation in her expression. “It doesn’t sound like a good life.” It sounded as if the magisters controlled everything, and unlike most other cities, you couldn’t simply walk away.

Enad looked bleak. “It’s all right.”

Rith said, “Many of those who have the coin to buy passage leave.” She grimaced, dispirited. “The traders know how much they can charge now, and few can afford it.”

Theri leaned her head on Rith’s shoulder. “It would be easier if the leviathan went back to sleep for good, or went closer to the western shore.”

“The western shore?” Moon asked.

“That’s where most of the traders come from.” Enad admitted, “If all of them could find us, and not just the ones the magisters give the trade-right to, it would be easier to leave. Or stay, if more people came back to live here.”

Stone dipped a cup out of the pot and handed it to Rith. “What about the eastern shore, where the forests are?”

Theri laughed. “Everyone knows monsters live there.”



After the tea was finished, the groundlings went on their way, and Moon and Stone walked toward Ardan’s tower. Moon hoped it was open during the day, and that they could at least get a look at who went in and out of it.

If the doors never opened at all, he wasn’t sure what they were going to do.

The walkway they were on, a narrow passage winding between the tall gray walls, was empty at the moment. They had passed a few groundlings earlier, all hauling two-wheeled carts, heading toward the harbor, and Moon had heard a few others on the bridges and balconies they had passed under.

“You didn’t ask them about Ardan,” Stone said.

He didn’t sound as if he was arguing the point, just curious. He had been letting Moon take the lead in finding things out, something which Moon had noticed and appreciated. Of course, if they failed, it would be mostly Moon’s fault. “I didn’t want them to get suspicious. If we just got here, we shouldn’t know who Ardan is yet.” Also, Enad was a talker, and Moon could too readily imagine him repeating the conversation to anyone who would listen. If Ardan was aware that something had tested his barriers last night, he might well be listening, and willing to pay for information. “I might ask them about the metal ship, later. It’s different enough from the others in port that people must notice it.”

Stone snorted in amusement, and Moon said, defensively, “What?”

“You talking to groundlings. That’s a change.”

Moon set his jaw, annoyed. “We are not flying up to them in the middle of nowhere. These people have no reason not to think we’re groundlings. There’s a difference.”

They reached the plaza at the base of Ardan’s tower. It wasn’t much more occupied than it had been last night. A few people were crossing the paving, but all seemed to be heading for the walkways or stairs, just passing through. The tower itself was still tightly shut.

The second story wine bar on the east side of the plaza was still open, or at least the door stood open and the music still played. Groundling places that sold liquors or drugs usually only opened in the evening, but maybe living on a restless leviathan required constant access to intoxicants. Moon started toward it. “Maybe we can talk to somebody in there.”

“If they’re all like Dari, that might not be so helpful,” Stone said, but followed him anyway.

The stairway climbed over another house’s roof, and the gray tile steps had a few recent stains that stunk of vomit and some kind of sweet liquor. Words were painted on the wall in several different languages, one of them Kedaic, advertising wine and smoke.

Moon stepped into the doorway. The place was bigger than it

looked on the outside, winding back away in a series of oddly shaped rooms. Cushioned benches were built into the walls, groundlings sprawled on them, most asleep or barely stirring. The whole interior was filled with drifts of variously colored fog. The cloyingly sweet odor made Moon sneeze. Groundling drugs and alcohol had never worked on him, and he didn't expect this would, either. He moved further in and Stone trailed after him.

As the main room curved away from the doorway, it widened out to a space where there was a small platform. Around it sat three fishy-gray groundlings, two playing stringed instruments and one a set of wooden pipes. On the platform, a golden-skinned groundling woman, dressed only in wispy scarves, moved to the music, though she looked half asleep. Dancing was another groundling thing that left Moon cold. The quick movements were often distracting and made him twitchy with the urge to hunt, and the slow movements were just boring. It was more fun to watch grasseaters graze.

Nearby stood an elaborate metal stand with a glass globe of blue water. The stands were scattered all over the room, fastened to bases built into the floor, and seemed to be the sources of the mist. Moon stepped closer and saw a little creature inside, a tiny amphibian with big eyes and feathery fins, gazing brightly back at him. *That's new*, he thought, and looked around again at the semi-conscious groundlings. Whatever the fog was, all the patrons looked too far gone to be of any use. *Dari was coherent compared to these people*. That was a scary thought.

A woman stepped out of the fog and moved toward him, watching him inquiringly. "You want to buy some smoke?" she asked. She was tall and slender, her skin a smooth matte black, and she had a shock of short white hair. White brows outlined her dark eyes, and she had gold paint dotted on her forehead, nose, and chin. She was wrapped in a silky blue robe that covered her completely, but she was much more attractive to look at than the sleepy dancer. It took Moon a moment to remember to answer her question. "Uh, no, not smoke." She seemed more amused than anything else, so Moon added, "We were looking for a place that sold food." Not true, but it was a good excuse for wandering in here.

"Not here." She nodded toward the door. "You'll need to go back toward the harbor. There's a market on the main walkway."

"Sorry." Moon turned to go.

She walked with him. "It's all right. I don't often get to speak to people who aren't sodden with drink or smoke." Stone, who had been wandering the shadowy areas, came back to Moon's side. She looked

him up and down and lifted a brow. "That's your father?"

"Grandfather," Stone corrected, and looked her up and down in return. It was as close to true as it was safe to get; most groundlings didn't live to be Stone's age.

Her mouth quirked in a smile. "Interesting family."

She seemed to be finding them odd but not dangerous, which was the best they could probably hope for. It also meant they could ask questions without looking any stranger than they already did. As she led them out, Moon asked, "We're looking for work. Does that tower hire laborers?"

"You don't want to work there. It's a strange place. It belongs to a magister. You stay away from them." She stopped just outside, but leaned in the doorway and didn't seem in a hurry for them to go. "They like their own way. Anybody like that is dangerous."

She was right enough about that. "What does he do in his tower that's so strange?"

"He collects things." Her brow furrowed, and she tried to explain, "Trinkets and art. Things from far places. Some of it makes your flesh crawl. You can see for yourself. The tower will open at midday."

"Open?" Stone asked.

"For anyone to go into the lower floors, to show off his collection and offer him new things. He does it every day. Likes to frighten people, probably." She pushed away from the door, turning to go back inside. "You go see for yourself—just don't ask for work there."

"We will," Moon said to her retreating back. "Thank you."



It was still early, so they went to the market the woman had spoken of. Moon couldn't count on being able to fly out to fish for remoras every day, and they needed to stay as well fed as possible. Moon traded one of their small sunstones for a couple of pots of cooked fish and clams, and a small pile of the marked metal bits that served as the local coinage. They sat down on the steps at the edge of a little plaza to split the food, watching the people in the market pass by.

It was busy, with stalls set up under the eaves of the buildings on each side of the walkway. Besides food, the stalls sold metalwork, pottery, a local cloth made of dyed fishskin as soft as the finest leather, and trade goods like silks and scented oils. Moon had looked at the roots and fruit, but they were all small, old, and far more

expensive than the fish. But then they all had to come in on the traders' ships.

The groundlings browsing the stalls were all better dressed than Rith, Enad, and Theri, but not in a much better frame of mind. Talk was muted, and people picked over the goods in a desultory way.

"Not very lively," Stone commented. He hadn't balked at the idea of eating cooked fish, but then Stone was odd for a Raksura. Though Moon did have to remind him not to gnaw on the clam shells in public.

"They can't afford the roots." Moon scraped up the last of the sauce. The stall holder had promised them four more bits for bringing the pots back. "Like Rith said, most of them probably want to leave." They were speaking Raksuran, and Moon kept an eye out for anyone showing undue interest, but everyone seemed wrapped up in his or her own concerns.

"There's something funny about all this." Moon lifted a brow, and Stone added, "Besides the fact that they built their city on a leviathan, even if it was sleeping at the time."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know." Stone spit out a piece of clamshell. "Maybe I'll know when I see Ardan."

"Planning on having a long conversation with him?" Moon asked. They couldn't afford revenge; the only thing Moon was planning on was getting the seed and getting out.

"A pointed conversation," Stone said, and smiled.

Chapter Ten

When the sun was directly overhead, something Moon could sense rather than see through the heavy mist and clouds, they went back to the plaza.

A small crowd had gathered near the tower. Some were wealthy local groundlings, all dressed in rich fabrics and smelling strongly of flower perfumes. Many had small ivory fans, though the day wasn't warm. The fans, and the perfumes, might be a defense against the humid fog, which compounded the leviathan's stench and absorbed every odor of the city. The others waiting to enter the tower wore subdued, work-roughened cloth and leather, and must be traders up from the harbor.

Moon and Stone joined the back of the crowd. A few of the traders glanced at them, their expressions ranging from thoughtful curiosity to annoyance, as if they feared competition. The locals ignored them, which was just as well.

Before they had left the market, Moon had taken another precaution. From a used clothing dealer he had bought battered pairs of boots for himself and Stone. They were just soft squares of fishskin that wrapped and tied around your foot and ankle. Stone had put them on without vocal protest, affecting an expression of long-suffering.

Raksura normally didn't wear shoes. Even in groundling form, the soles of their feet were as hard as horn, and Moon had always found shoes impossible to shift with. Most groundlings didn't notice, considering it just a physical quirk of another race. But if Ardan and his thieves had ever managed to see any live Raksura, they might be looking for such telltale signs.

As the doors opened, Moon sniffed, then unobtrusively tasted the air. There was a hint of decay, of death, under the rush of stale scents. It disappeared into the miasma of leviathan, perfume, smoke, fog, and anxious groundling before he could be sure it was more than his imagination. Moon flicked a look at Stone, but his eyes were on the doorway. There was no hint of the magical barrier. Either it had been taken away so the doors could be opened, or it was only in place

during the night.

They followed the traders through an arched entrance hall, the white walls carved to look like long drapes of fabric. Guards wearing coats of reptile hide and armed with short metal-tipped spears stood at frequent intervals. They wore weapons at their belts that looked like small crossbows, just from the brief glimpses Moon was able to get. *Good*, he thought sourly. *First we have a groundling shaman, and now we have projectile weapons.*

He had been expecting the inside of this place to be something like their abandoned tower, if on a larger and less decayed scale. But the size of it caught him by surprise.

The entryway opened out into a large circular hall, with a wide stairway curving up to the level above. The walls were set with alabaster panels framed by heavy carved drapery. Vapor-lights hung from sconces made to look like water serpents.

The knot of groundlings in front spread out a little, staring upward in astonishment. Moon looked up and froze, a quiver traveling down his spine.

Suspended high overhead was a giant blue-scaled waterling, its body a good sixty paces long. It was half-fish, half-groundling, with groundling-like arms and a scaled torso ending in a long tail, its fins as large as the sails of a small fishing boat. Its huge clawed hands dangled and its head pointed right down toward them, glassy eyes staring angrily, open jaw big enough to walk upright through, teeth stained yellow and black. It was dead—it had to be dead—stuffed and preserved and slowly decaying.

Stone bumped his arm, impatience mingled with reassurance, and Moon made himself move forward into the hall. That, or something very like it, was what had nearly grabbed Moon when he was flying low over the sea. The traders just ahead of them murmured in uneasy awe and discomfort. Moon was glad he wasn't the only one.

The local groundlings, apparently used to the sight, had already started up the stairs. Stone followed and Moon trailed after him. He had a bad feeling the giant waterling was only the beginning. At least he knew now what the woman in the wine bar had meant when she said the display in the tower was disturbing.

Preserved carvings hung along the inside stairwell, large sections chipped out of the walls of some other building. The faded paint showed groundlings with elaborate jeweled headdresses riding in procession on giant grasseaters, taller than the trees along the side of the avenue. In any other circumstances, Moon would have stopped for

a closer look, but this place was making his skin twitch. Most of the groundlings passed the carvings with only brief glances as well, their attention on the gallery above the stairs.

The next level held far more exhibits. Carvings of stone and wood, all obviously cut or chipped out of their original locations, some painted or set with jewels. Some statues were rough and crude, others were beautifully carved, of strange types of groundlings, of other creatures Moon had never seen before. There were metalwork panels, shields, weapons, a whole row of full sets of armor, inlaid with gold, silver, and gems, the helmets formed into snarling animal masks. But next to all the wonderful things there were cubbies in the walls, and in each one was a dead creature, stuffed and posed in a horribly lifelike position. Standing on a low plinth in the center of the hall was the skeleton of something like a branch spider, standing more than fifteen paces high. The bones had been rearticulated somehow, maybe with wire, and the effect was eerily lifelike.

Moon and Stone moved out into the room, as the groundlings wandered and pointed and exclaimed. It looked like this was as far up into the tower as they were allowed to go. A shorter open stairway led to a set of doors, but they were tightly shut and watched by two guards.

Stone stopped suddenly. He was staring at a stand with a large jar set atop it.

Moon's breath caught. *We're in the right place.* The jar was carved of rich dark wood, and it had obviously been made by Arbora. The sinuous shapes of winged Raksura wrapped it, their claws hooked over the rim. The wide opening was sealed with a single piece of polished onyx. Stone turned away from it, and said, low-voiced, "It's a queen's funerary urn."

Moon looked down, biting his lip, trying to conceal his start of shock. "From Indigo Cloud?" he muttered, speaking Raksuran.

Stone shook his head. "Ours were put into hollows in the wood of the tree, and the mentors made it grow around them. No one could get to them." He looked at it again, eyes narrow. "This came from another colony."

Moon swallowed, relieved. At least it wasn't one of Jade or Stone's ancestors. "Ardan's been to the forests. The seed has to be here somewhere."

Stone strolled away toward one side of the room. Moon took the other.

Delin, Niran's scholarly grandfather, had a collection from his travels too, but it had been limited to pretty samples of pottery and other trinkets, and his books of notes and drawings. Ardan had sea creatures with maws of teeth and staring eyes, a flightless giant bird like the vargits that stalked the jungles far to the east, and something that was just a bundle of tentacles with mouths on the ends. There was a Tath, standing upright and pinned to a wooden post, the boney mask that protected its face making it look sightless. Its jaw hung open and its long clawed hands dangled uselessly, and Moon still had the urge to rip it apart. He was half-afraid to look into an alcove and discover that Ardan had collected a Fell. Though he supposed the Fell would have long since found a way to reach the island if Ardan had been fool enough to stuff a ruler or a major kethel.

Then he walked past an alcove with an occupant that stopped him in his tracks.

A waterling lay stretched out on a plinth, but it was nothing like Nobent or the monstrous creature downstairs. This was a sea realm dweller. Her skin was pale green, with a pattern of opalescent scales. The heavy ribbons of her hair were dark green, like sea wrack, and there were sharp fins along her calves and thighs. Her fingers and toes were webbed, and tipped with deceptively delicate claws.

Moon stepped closer, unwillingly fascinated. She still wore her jewelry: a belt of pearls, white metal armbands shaped like water snakes. He couldn't see the death wound; possibly it was in her back. Whatever preserved her maintained the appearance of life, betrayed only by the faint scent of corruption and the sunken, bruised skin around her closed eyes. Moon had never seen a sea dweller this close before. He would have much preferred to see this one alive and swimming.

He turned away to see Stone regarding it with a grimace of disgust. "I'm surprised he doesn't have any stuffed groundlings," Moon said. There was no way Ardan could even pretend to classify a sealing with the Tath, the branch spider, and the other predators.

Stone gave the dead woman one last dark glance. "He doesn't have them down here, where the others can see."

He had a point. "Have you found anything?"

"It's not here." Stone's jaw set, as if it took all he had to suppress a growl.

"It's not on display," Moon corrected. The next step seemed obvious. Tricky and potentially dangerous, but obvious. "I'll say I want to see Ardan, tell him I know where he can find more Raksuran

treasures.”

Stone shook his head. “Moon—”

Moon explained impatiently, “If he believes me, maybe I can look around inside the—”

“Moon, if he finds out what you are, he’ll collect *you*.”

“I know that.” With effort, Moon kept his voice low. “He won’t find out. I’m good at not being caught.”

Stone was more skeptical. “I saw how good you were at it when your groundling friends staked you out to be bird bait.”

It was unfair to bring that up. “That was different.” It was different in a hundred ways. Ilane had wanted to get rid of Moon somehow; if he hadn’t turned out to be a shapeshifter she could accuse of being a Fell, she would have thought of something else. Presumably Ardan wouldn’t have that kind of personal malice towards him. Not on such short acquaintance, anyway. “And he’s not going to have Fell poison.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Fine, so what do you want to do?”

Stone didn’t have to think about it. “I’ll tell him I know where to find the treasures.”

“You can’t. The rooms upstairs could be too small for you to shift in. You’d be stuck.” Obviously Stone didn’t object to the plan, just the fact that Moon was the one implementing it. He stifled the impulse to feel hurt; Stone couldn’t think he would betray the court to some random groundling sorcerer. Still...” What, you don’t trust me?” All right, maybe he hadn’t quite stifled the impulse.

Stone gave him a withering look. “Jade made me swear to take care of you and not let you do anything crazy.”

Moon stared at him, torn between extreme pique and gratification at the show of concern. And there was always the chance that Stone was just making it up, to justify him taking the risk instead of Moon. “I don’t do crazy things. I don’t need to be taken care of. And since when do you listen to Jade? Or anybody?”

“I’m a consort, I listen to queens. Something you might consider at some point.”

How Stone managed to say that with a straight face, Moon had no idea, and he wasn’t going to dignify it with an argument. Instead, he pointed out, “None of the others can do this.” In either of her forms,

Jade would be recognized as a Raksura by any of the thieves who had been to the colony tree and seen the carvings. None of the warriors had ever had to hide what they were. The only groundling they had spent any time with was Niran, and he didn't count. "It has to be you or me, and it can't be you."

Stone folded his arms and stared at the wall. He said, "You don't know I'd get stuck," but Moon knew resignation when he heard it, even from Stone.



First, they made a quick trip back to their tower so Moon could retrieve his consort's gifts from their hiding place. If he was going to convince Ardan he knew where Raksuran treasure lay, it would be handy to have proof. He convinced Stone not to return to Ardan's tower with him; if something went wrong, then at least only one of them would be caught, and Stone would be free to find a way to rescue Moon—before Moon's dead body turned up in Ardan's collection.

Stone agreed reluctantly, and didn't tell Moon to be careful. They both knew that being careful wouldn't get them the seed.

By the time he returned to Ardan's tower, most of the locals had gone, but the traders seemed to be waiting for something. Moon hoped it was for Ardan to make an appearance.

Finally, the doors at the top of the stairs opened and a group of groundlings came out. Some were guards, some obviously servants, and one, a short blue-pearl man dressed in rich gold and green robes, was obviously the leader. *That has to be Ardan.* Moon followed the other traders over, trying not to show the tension that was making his teeth ache. This was the one thing he was most worried about; if Ardan was very powerful, he might be able to tell Moon was a shifter just by looking at him. As an ivory-inlaid folding table and a chair were whisked into place for the leader, one of the servant groundlings announced, "This is the Superior Bialin. He speaks for Magister Ardan."

Of course he is, Moon thought sourly, disappointed. Ardan couldn't come down here, where the big doors downstairs were still open and Moon could leap the gallery and have a straight path outside if anything went wrong.

There were several traders here to offer objects and information, and Moon let them go first so he could watch what happened. It was a simple procedure: the traders each presented their objects to Bialin, who examined them, and then told the trader it was garbage and to go

away. Moon wasn't close enough to get a good look at the objects, but from what he overheard, most were either jewelry pieces or small carvings from distant groundling cities—the kind of things that would have pleased Delin, but that were far too prosaic for Ardan's taste.

Two traders had a small chest, which they opened to reveal the preserved body of a little creature. Moon stood on tiptoes to catch a glimpse and thought it looked like a treeling sewn onto a lizard.

Bialin gazed at them tiredly. "This is a treeling sewn onto a lizard. Get out."

Finally it was Moon's turn. He stepped up to the table and Bialin said skeptically, "And what have you got to offer?"

Watching the others fail had made Moon more confident. "I can tell the Magister where he can find more Raksuran treasure."

"Raksuran? What is—" Bialin's gaze sharpened and suddenly Moon had all his attention. He leaned back in his chair, trying to look uninterested. "What is that?"

Bialin had already lost the chance to play coy. His first reaction had been telling. Moon said, "They live in the forest Reaches on the eastern coast. He already has that wooden pot with the onyx lid. It's a Raksuran queen's funerary urn."

Bialin leaned forward, giving up his skeptical pose. "How do you know this?"

"I've been to the forest."

"Can you prove it?"

Moon unbuckled his belt, and laid it and the sheathed knife on the table.

Bialin leaned over it, frowning. Then he snapped his fingers at his subordinate. The man handed him a heavy glass lens, and Bialin held it to his eye to study the leather more closely. He traced the pattern of lines, then drew the knife partway and fingered the carving on the hilt. Moon pulled his sleeve up and held his arm out, holding the red-gold consort's wristband almost under Bialin's nose. Bialin just blinked and switched his scrutiny to it.

Finally he sat up, lowering the lens. "Yes." He nodded to himself and smiled faintly. "I think the Magister will be very interested."

□

Moon followed Bialin and his attendants and guards up the short flight of stairs and through the double doors, into the private recesses

of the tower. When the heavy doors closed behind him and the guards turned the lock, Moon took a deep breath. He was committed now.

They didn't go far, down a high-ceilinged corridor and then into a large room. The decoration was all heavy, the alabaster carving full of staring faces, reflecting cold light from the vapor-lamps. The ceiling was just as heavily carved as the walls, with inset squares and circles, the edges made to look like bunched fabric. Moon scanned just enough to note there was nothing lurking in the corners, and focused on the man seated at the table in the center.

Like Bialin, Ardan was one of the blue-skinned groundlings, but he was younger than Moon had expected. His features were even and handsome, and there were faint lines of concentration at the corners of his eyes. He wore a silky gray robe shot with silver, simple compared to how some of the other wealthy locals dressed. He was reading a roll of white paper spread out on the ivory-inset surface of the table, and didn't glance up at them.

Bialin stepped around the table, leaned over and whispered to him. Finally Ardan looked up. His gaze was sharp but faintly skeptical, as if Bialin had erred in the past and his expectations were not high. In a voice so dry it was dusty, he said, "Let me see these objects."

Bialin gestured impatiently. He looked nervous, and it was probably his head on the block if Ardan wasn't pleased. Moon could sympathize; his nerves were jumping, but Ardan didn't seem to know he was in the room with a shifter. He put the knife and belt down on the table, hesitated for a moment, then slipped off the wristband and set it next to them.

Ardan leaned forward, took the glass lens Bialin held ready for him, and began to examine the objects. The rough skin just below the edge of his pearly skull started to furrow with interest.

The vapor-lights hanging overhead misted in the cool damp air, and Moon waited, tracking the bead of sweat working its way down his back. With the sea kingdom woman lying stuffed in his grand hall like an animal, Moon had half-expected Ardan to look like a monster. He didn't. He just looked like a clever man.

He's not a monster because he doesn't see that woman as a person, Moon thought. If he had known Moon was a Raksura, he wouldn't see him as a person, either, just another potential collector's item. Moon was suddenly glad he had bothered with the boots.

Ardan examined the knife, belt, and wristband for a long silent moment. Then he looked up and studied Moon, his hooded eyes thoughtful. "What are you called?"

“Niran.” Giving a fake name might be overcautious. In both Kedaic and Altanic, Moon’s name was just a random sound, meaningless. But Moon looked into Ardan’s eyes again and decided he couldn’t be too careful.

He gestured to the collection on the table. “You’re selling these things?” “No, I’m selling the information.” He would hand over the knife and the wristband if he had to, but he didn’t think a real trader would be eager to part with them either. “You’re not interested in trinkets.”

Ardan conceded that with a faint smile. “No, I’m not.” He was now clearly intrigued. “How did you know that container was a... queen’s funerary urn?”

Moon had absolutely no idea how Stone had identified it as a queen’s urn, but then it didn’t matter if Ardan thought he was lying for effect. “It was like the others we found. The scholar I was with said that’s what they were. His name was Delin-Evran-lindel, from the Golden Isles in the Yellow Sea.”

“You found other urns?”

“In an abandoned Raksuran—” Moon reminded himself not to be too exact with the terminology. “Hive.”

Ardan nodded. “And where was this abandoned hive?”

“Near the edge of the Reaches.” And Moon began to describe a journey on a flying boat to the old Indigo Cloud colony, the one that had been built into the groundling ruin straddling the river valley, but with the location transposed to the lakes they had passed before entering the forest.

As Ardan’s expression grew even more intent, Moon populated this version of the colony with scattered bones and other grisly remains, to explain why these Raksura had left all their belongings behind. Finally Ardan lifted a hand. “Stop. I wish someone else to hear this.” He called one of the guards over and spoke to him briefly. Moon caught the words, “Bring Negal.”

Bringing someone else in to listen was possibly a trick to catch Moon in a lie, to see if he changed his story with repetition, or if the details sounded memorized. He wasn’t worried; the details were all true, just arranged in different ways from how they had actually happened.

As they waited, Ardan set the knife aside, saying, “You’ll get this back when you leave here.” He handed the belt and wristband to Bialin, who handed them to his subordinate, who handed them back

to Moon. Moon buckled on the belt, then slipped the band back onto his wrist, pulling his sleeve down over it. He hoped this was a good sign.

After a short time, another groundling was led into the room. He was from a different race than those common to the leviathan, with light brown skin, curly gray hair, and a trim gray beard. He wore dark pants and a shirt of a knit material in a coarse weave, a short jacket, and heavy low boots. Clothes meant for colder weather, and bearing a close resemblance to the kind of clothing left behind on the metal ship.

We were right, Moon thought. His skin prickled, something that happened when prey was in sight. He folded his arms, hoping he looked bored and impatient.

The man's eyes were dark and wary. From the tension in his body he didn't appear eager to be here. Ardan said briskly, "Negal, sit down. This man is called Niran. He's an explorer who has been to the fringe of the eastern forest."

Negal's expression relaxed slightly. Whatever he had been afraid to hear, that wasn't it. He took a seat on a stool, saying with some irony, "Ah, how interesting." He spoke Kedaic too, but with a different accent than the others.

At a nod from Ardan, Moon described the old colony again, throwing in a few additional details.

Negal sat forward, listening with growing interest. When Moon paused for breath, he said, "Were there carvings of both types of Raksura, those with wings and those without? Was there anything to indicate what the relationship between them was?"

"I saw some carvings of wingless Raksura." Moon didn't think a trader would be much interested in what Raksuran daily life was like. "I didn't pay attention. I was more interested in the jewels and metal."

Negal leaned back, clearly displeased by that answer. Ardan eyed Negal with an air of satisfaction. He seemed about to end the interview, and Moon took his chance. Trying to keep his tone even, he said, "There were these things, like big seeds." He held up his hands, shaping something the right size. "Three of them. They were wood, or shell, with a rough surface. The scholar I was with said they could be valuable, but not to him."

Negal glanced at Ardan, as if expecting a reaction. Ardan only looked thoughtful, and said, "Did you take them?"

"No." Moon hoped that Ardan had no extra-keen senses and

couldn't hear his pulse pounding. "The others wanted to leave them there. I couldn't see a use for them, so I didn't argue."

Ardan nodded, still thoughtful. "Thank you for bringing me this information. You'll be paid well, but we'll have to speak of all this further. You will stay the night here."

Moon didn't want to appear relieved. He said, "I have friends waiting for me outside."

"Surely they knew it would take you some time to convince me to pay for your tale." Ardan smiled, and it even reached his eyes. "Let them wait."



Bialin and two guards took Moon up a large winding stair. The walls were covered with carved figures, mostly male groundlings dressed in elaborate robes, staring down with grim expressions.

They passed landings with big double doors, all tightly closed. Finally they stopped and Bialin took out a ring of large keys, unlocked the doors, and stepped back for the guard to push them open.

They walked into an anteroom with yet more closed doors, with an arch opening into a hallway.

"You'll sleep here." Bialin gestured briskly and the guard opened a door. "You will not be allowed to leave this level. The Magister will send for you when he wishes to speak to you again."

Moon stepped into the room. The guard shut the door behind him and he listened for a bolt to click. It didn't. So Ardan allowed his guests at least limited freedom of movement. That was a relief.

The room didn't look like a cell, either, except for the general oppressive air of the heavy carving. There was a bed with dark blankets against the far wall, and a woven rug to warm the gray slate floor. In a curtained alcove there was even a metal water basin with a tap, and a wooden cabinet that probably held a chamber pot. There were also clips that held the furniture fixed to the stone floor, like the broken ones in the abandoned tower. A vapor-light in a chased metal holder hung from the high ceiling. There was no window, no bolt on the inside of the door, but there was a narrow opening at the top. It might be meant for ventilation, but anyone standing in the hall would be able to hear what the occupants were doing.

Moon stood still, listening to Bialin and the guards move away, then he tasted the air. It wasn't stale, though not terribly fresh, and clouded with the scent of the local perfumes and of unfamiliar groundlings.

When the anteroom sounded empty, he opened the door and stepped out. The heavy double doors to the stairwell were closed. Moon moved close enough to hear the breathing and faint restless movement of at least two guards stationed on the other side. He turned down the hallway, toward the sound of voices.

The doorways he passed all had the gap at the top, and he didn't hear any movement within, but there were low voices somewhere ahead. Then the hall curved and an archway opened into a larger room.

Like the rest of the tower, it was grim, high-ceilinged, and cold, but it looked a little more like a place people actually lived in. The vapor-lights were suspended over cushioned couches. There was a circular hearth in the center, with a slate-sheathed chimney that stretched up into the high ceiling. Negal, two other men, and a woman sat on a couch and a couple of stools, having an anxious, whispered conversation. They all looked to be from the same race of groundlings as Negal, and all dressed in the same type of clothes, pants, shirts, and jackets, thick soft material or knits.

It took them a moment to notice Moon, standing silently in the doorway. When they did, one man started in alarm and fell off his stool. The others stared at Moon. Moon stared back.

Negal recovered first, saying in Kedaic, "This is Niran, the explorer I was telling you about."

The man still on the couch dug a small object of glass and wire out of his jacket pocket. They were spectacles, lenses meant to go over the eyes; Moon had seen them used in Kish. The man put them on and stared at Moon some more. He had stringy dark hair and a belligerent expression.

Negal cleared his throat. "This is Esom, our deviser, and Orlis, his assistant." Orlis was the one who had fallen off the stool. He was younger, with thinner features, a more diffident expression. "And Karsis Vale, our physician." She had long curly hair tied back under a dark cap. Her features were sharp, and her sober clothes didn't quite fit, making her look gawky and awkward. She also wore spectacles like Esom, which made Moon think there was a resemblance. The Kedaic word for *physician* meant the same thing as the Altanic *healer*, but Moon had no idea what a *deviser* was.

"He won't let you leave, you know," Karsis said, tense and a little angry, either at Ardan or Moon or both.

"He will if he wants to find the ruin," Moon said, moving to the center hearth and sitting down on the stone rim. He didn't have to

fake an air of unconcern. Escaping was something he would worry about after he found the seed. He would probably worry really hard about it at that point, but not just at the moment.

“That’s what we thought,” Esom said with bitter emphasis.

There was another archway in the far wall, open to a corridor, but it looked like it just circled around toward the main foyer. The hearth was more promising. The stone-lined bowl in the center was set up to burn some sort of oil, though it was unlit now. He leaned back and looked up the chimney. *That’s a possibility.* “Is that your metal ship, down in the harbor?” If these weren’t the thieves, he would let River call himself First Consort.

“Yes,” Negal answered, his voice sharp with interest. “It’s still there?”

Moon said, “It was yesterday,” and they all turned to each other, talking in their own language again, agitated but keeping their voices low. Moon sat back and looked them over. They weren’t quite what he had been expecting, and he couldn’t decide why. “Did Ardan hire you to go to the eastern coast and loot the Reaches?”

They all stared again, and Esom actually seemed offended. “We didn’t *loot* anything,” he said tightly, “And we weren’t hired by Ardan, we’re his prisoners. He’s killed five members of our crew.”

That was no more and probably much less than they deserved. Moon glanced at Negal, and said carefully, “Ardan seemed interested in those wooden seed things. You found some?”

Negal hesitated, his lips pursed, as if trying to decide whether to answer. But Orlis nodded glumly and said, “We found one. Ardan wanted it—” Esom hit him in the shoulder. “Why are you talking to him?”

Orlis winced away and gave him an irritated glare. “Why not?” he said, with more life in his voice. “What does it matter to us? We’re still stuck here.”

Karsis stirred, saying thoughtfully, “Maybe if Ardan knows where to find more of the things, he’ll send us after them.”

Moon looked down, scuffed at the gray tile with his worn fish-skin boot. *So close.* It wouldn’t be in these rooms, where Ardan kept his guests/prisoners. He could ask where it was, but that would just make him look like exactly what he was, a thief who had tricked his way in here to steal from Ardan’s collection. He thought he had already shown too much interest in it. He didn’t want these people trading him to Ardan for their freedom. Better to keep them talking

about themselves. “Why is he holding you prisoner? What did you do to him?”

Orlis started. Karsis stared at Moon, lips thin with annoyance. Esom took a breath for an angry answer, but Negal stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Negal said wearily, “We did nothing to him. Apparently he finds us... interesting company.”

So Ardan had collected them, as well. Moon didn’t feel terribly sympathetic. They weren’t dead and stuffed, and if not for them he would be back at Indigo Cloud Court in a bower with Jade, making clutches. Trying to keep the irony out of his voice, he said, “What makes you so interesting?”

Negal watched him for a moment, as if trying to decide if Moon wanted a serious answer or not. Finally he said, “We come from a land far to the west. It lies atop a tall plateau, isolated by boiling seas, impassable cliffs, rocky expanses with steam vents and chasms. We had legends of other lands, other peoples, but they were only legends. No one believed it was possible to leave our plateau. Or that if we did leave, we would find nothing but an endless lifeless sea.” He smiled ruefully. “We thought the boundaries of our little existence formed the entire world.”

Esom slumped, anger giving way to resignation. He muttered, “The plateau is not that small. It’s four thousand pathres across, easily.”

Negal continued, “Our Philosophical Society had long been exploring different methods of leaving the plateau as an intellectual exercise. Until we discovered one that actually seemed to have a chance of success. We built prototypes, experimented, and finally developed the *Klodifore*, the metal ship you saw in the harbor. Our crew of volunteers sailed away on what we thought would be a voyage of great discovery.”

Karsis touched his hand. “It has been that.” Defensively, she added to Moon, “We traveled for six months with no real trouble, visiting the different civilizations along the coast, learning this language so we could communicate. Then we ran into this island.”

Esom said, “Literally. We were plotting a course back across the sea toward home, and the leviathan swam into sight. So we decided to stop and see what kind of people lived on it.” He sounded so bitterly ashamed of the decision, it was likely he was the one who had pressed for it.

All right, so their story was more interesting than Moon had thought. “Then why did you go to the Reaches with Ardan?”

Orlis said bleakly, "He tricked us. He courted us, showed us things in his collections, talked about the trip he was planning to study the strange creatures who lived in the forest Reaches." He shrugged. "He said it was a long way, and that as a magister he could only spend so much time away from the leviathan or the city would be in danger. Our ship was the only one that could make the journey in a short time."

"It's not that far to the forest coast," Moon said, and then remembered that the leviathan might have been much further out to sea. And that maybe he shouldn't seem to know exactly how far it was to the forest coast.

But Orlis said, "Not the journey to the coast, the journey inland."

Esom said, with a faint sneer, "You probably won't understand this, but our ship is capable of flight."

"It's a flying boat, a wind-ship?" Moon said, startled. "It has a sustainer?" That... explained a lot. Why Ardan had needed these people, why he couldn't simply have gone with his own men. How they made it over the forest floor without being killed, how they had gotten up to the knothole entrance. The Kek hadn't seen the ship, but then most of them had been on the other side of the tree in hiding. *They didn't see our flying boats either.* It didn't explain why they had bothered to open the tree's root entrance, but maybe they hadn't been able to keep the heavier metal ship that high in the air long enough for everyone to disembark.

Esom was blank with astonishment. "Uh... it's not called a sustainer, but—"

"Apparently a civilization called the Golden Isles also has flying craft," Negal told Esom kindly. He turned to Moon. "I wanted to ask you—"

Moon heard a door open and three people approach briskly down the hall. The others immediately fell silent and waited tensely. One of Bialin's servants appeared in the doorway with two guards. He was an older blue-pearl man with a harried expression, and under his perfume he smelled of fear-sweat. To Negal's group, he said, "The Magister wants you for the evening meal in three callings of the hour."

Nobody seemed horrified, so Moon assumed the man didn't mean that the way it sounded. Then the servant looked at Moon and, in a tone that conveyed how doubtful he found this, added, "The summons includes you."

Apparently Ardan's invitations didn't normally include scruffy

foreign traders who came to sell information. Moon was certain this one included him because of one thing: Ardan wanted more seeds. *If I can just get him to show me the one he already has.*

Chapter Eleven

The dinner was odd, though not as fraught for Moon as the one at Emerald Twilight.

It was held in a large room a few levels above the guest quarters. Giant carved images of dour blue-pearl groundlings stared down from the walls, all more than thirty paces high, some forming columns supporting the arched ceiling. Their expressions gave Moon the impression that was he was being watched with disapproval, but he felt like that a lot, so it was probably just him. There was a small pool with a fountain at one end of the room for show, not for drinking or swimming. The large hearth at the other end was big enough to roast a bando-hopper. Like the one down near the guest rooms, it was unlit.

For the dinner, polished stone benches were arranged around a low marble-topped table at the hearth end of the room. They were draped with fine linen and softened with brocaded cushions. The heavy furniture wasn't fastened to the floor, but Moon noticed the table had ridges carved in it to help keep the plates and cups from sliding. Efficient servants placed the food on the table. Unlike the party in the other tower Moon had spied on, Ardan apparently only hired young male blue-pearl groundlings.

Negal and his people were the only other guests, sitting uncomfortably around on the benches. From remarks Moon overheard from the servants, Ardan had a family stashed away somewhere in the tower. He just didn't let them mix with his "guests."

As the food was served, Ardan spoke with Negal, mostly about the cities along the coast that Negal's ship had visited. The other three just sat there and ate mostly in silence, looking and acting like captives, grim and suspicious. Negal spoke easily enough, but his eyes were weary, as if the conversation was just another facet of his captivity. Moon told himself it was foolish to feel sorry for them. *So they say they were tricked into going to the Reaches.* They had still helped loot the colony tree.

The food was far better than what had been on offer at the market. There were several unfamiliar varieties of preserved fruit, different types of fish and shellfish cooked in various sauces, and

sweet breads that had to be almost as expensive as the fruit, since the grain would all have to be shipped in. Moon didn't have to force himself to eat. It was all so good he could have finished everything on the table, but he managed to confine himself to only two servings. The wine they had been provided with had no effect on him, but he drank it anyway.

As the meal came to an end, Ardan toyed with his goblet and said, "I've invited other guests, who should be arriving soon." The others were sitting upright on the benches; Moon took a cue from Ardan and lounged back on the cushions with his wine goblet. It was easier to pretend to be relaxed that way. His apparent ease made Esom stare at him in annoyance.

"Showing us off again?" Karsis said to Ardan, affecting boredom in a deliberate way. She jerked her head toward Moon. "Or your new acquisition?"

"My guests are all seekers of knowledge," Ardan answered mildly. "But I'm afraid they're more interested in my collections than in intellectual discourse." Esom snorted in derision, and was ignored. Then Ardan turned to Moon, and asked, "How did you come to be on your expedition to the forest?"

Good question, Moon thought. "The Islanders were hiring hands. I needed the work."

"The Golden Islands are not your home, then?"

The Islanders were all like Niran, smaller people, with golden skin and white hair like silken floss. Niran had said the maps aboard the *Valendera* didn't range this far, but Ardan might know more about the eastern region than he pretended. "No. I was working on a Yellow Sea trading barge that came to port there. The expedition offered better pay."

"But more danger."

Moon shrugged. "They didn't explain that part."

Ardan chuckled indulgently. "Sometimes a little deception furthers the course of scholarly pursuits."

Karsis stared, Esom and Orlis exchanged an incredulous look, and even Negal's stoic expression turned sardonic. Apparently oblivious, Ardan asked Moon, "Where do you come from?"

"The east, near the gulf of Abascene." This was, technically, true, and Abascene had the extra benefit of being even further from here than the Yellow Sea. "The place we were living was destroyed by Fell, turns ago. I left with the other refugees and I've been traveling ever

since.” This wasn’t quite as true but Moon had lived in enough places that had been destroyed by the Fell to supply convincing details, if he needed to.

Ardan frowned in thought, as if honestly interested. That wasn’t something Moon had expected. Ardan said, “I’ve heard of the Fell, but never seen one.”

“You’re lucky.” Moon decided it was time he asked a question in return. “Why did you go to the Reaches?”

Ardan lifted his brows as if amused by Moon’s presumption. Moon suspected the conversations with Negal and the others tended to be onesided. Ardan answered, “I was curious. I had heard intriguing things about the area.”

Esom said abruptly, “What are the Fell?”

Moon felt his jaw tighten; a dramatic change of subject was exactly what he didn’t need. Ardan gestured for him to answer, and he said, reluctantly, “They’re shapeshifters that travel in large flights. They eat people and burn cities because they enjoy it.” He had everyone’s attention; even Karsis had lost her cynical expression. “Some are as big as the sea monster hanging down in the first floor hall. Others are smaller than you. When they shift, they look like ordinary groundlings. One could walk through the streets of this city and no one would know.” “Like the Raksura,” Karsis said.

Moon leaned back against the cushion and took a drink of wine, just in case he didn’t have his expression as under control as he thought. If the Raksura had had anything but a distant kinship with the Fell, the leviathan’s inhabitants would have long since found out about it.

“Not at all.” Ardan turned to her, his expression serious. “The Fell are thieves, predators, parasites. They build nothing, make nothing, grow nothing, have no art, no written language. They loot their victims’ habitations for everything they need. You saw the artwork in the Raksuran hive. Creatures who could create such as that have no need to steal.”

Karsis sat back, thwarted from starting an argument. Negal said, wryly, “Then it’s a pity your men destroyed some of the images, removing the inlay.”

“Not many.” Ardan eyed him. “And they were punished.”

Karsis took a sharp breath, Esom and Negal looked grim. Orlis set the pastry he had been nibbling down on his plate, as if the memory had taken away his appetite.

Moon took it that the punishment had been extreme and effective. He was surprised the hunters hadn't found more bodies. But at least they were back on the right subject. "I take it you weren't interested in the gems and metal." He glanced around, pointedly indicating the room and the wealth it represented.

"No, you're quite correct, I already have more of that than I need." Ardan lifted his goblet and studied the purple-tinted glass pensively. "I am the youngest magister in the city. I took my father's place when he died, several turns ago. The competition between myself and the others, as well as our duty to see to the city's survival, drove me to seek knowledge and avenues to greater power."

Yes. Moon held his breath. If Ardan would elaborate, mention the seed, if Moon could ask to see it...

Then Ardan set his goblet aside and glanced up as Bialin approached the table. "Ah, I believe my other guests have arrived."



The other guests turned out to be a large group of wealthy local groundlings and their servants and hangers-on. The big chamber rapidly became well-occupied.

They seemed to be in a contest to outdo each other with the richness of their clothes. There were silks in every color, sheer gauzes, black and gold brocades. There were also some traders, all looking much more prosperous than the ones who had come to sell trinkets today. There was apparently nothing else to do in this city in the evening except go to parties in the big towers or drug yourself unconscious in the wine and smoke bars.

Servants put out more food and drink, but people didn't sit to eat. Instead, they walked around to mingle and talk. Moon was able to fade into the background as the crowd grew, watching and being watched in turn.

There didn't seem to be much to discover. The conversations Ardan had were all brief, all apparently casual. The point of all this seemed to be showing his wealth off to the other groundlings. At the moment Ardan stood with a richly dressed old man, surrounded by a small audience of lower-ranking groundlings. Ardan was at ease, as usual, but the old man simmered with anger.

"Trader Niran."

Moon glanced around even before he remembered that was supposed to be him, which was why he had taken the name of someone he knew. It was Bialin, who motioned urgently for him to

follow. "The Magister would like to speak with you."

"Who's that with him?" Moon asked.

Bialin pressed his lips together in dissatisfaction at Moon's lack of instant obedience, but answered, "Lethen, another magister."

Moon followed Bialin over to the group. Unlike Ardan, Lethen was ruinously old. The pearly surface of his skull was dulled and worn, disturbingly like raw bone. Deep lines were etched around his mouth and eyes, and his blue skin had an unhealthy, pale tinge. He was dressed in blue and gold brocade, and leaned on an ornate ivory cane. He had blue gems somehow mounted in the age-yellowed base of his skull cap. Judging by his pinched expression, the process had been painful.

As Moon and Bialin arrived, Ardan said to Lethen, "Trader Niran has brought me word of another site of interest." He nodded to Moon. "Show him the bracelet, if you would."

Moon pulled the cuff of his shirt up and held out his arm. The red gold gleamed on the entwined serpentine forms.

Lethen leaned in to look and his hands tightened on his cane. His nails were like gray horn against his lined blue skin. He said, tightly, "I see."

There was an undercurrent here, a strong one. *Lethen wants Raksuran treasure? Or he knows about the seeds and wants one?* Moon wondered, and watched Lethen regard Ardan with a bitterness bordering on hate. Ardan definitely had some hold over him. Just to stir the pot a little, Moon said, "Do you want me to tell him what I found in the ruin?"

Ardan flicked him a look, part surprise and part amusement. "Not necessary." He gave Moon an ironic nod. "You may go."

Tugging his sleeve down, Moon wandered away, circled the nearest statue-pillar, and stopped just within earshot. He was mildly surprised to find Karsis already there, eavesdropping. She glared at him, not very pleased to be caught.

Sounding as if it was a wonderful joke, Ardan was saying to Lethen, "So, will you mount your own expedition to the coast?"

Lethen snapped, "I want you to allow another trading clan access to our harbor."

"Your wants are immaterial." Ardan was clearly bored with the change of subject. "There's no need."

"There is need. My artisans can't produce anything when they

can't get raw materials."

The boredom was turning into annoyance. "I'll consider it."

"There's no need to keep this stranglehold—" Ardan was already walking away, stubbornly pursued by Lethen.

Karsis let out a frustrated breath. "Well, that was pointless." She flicked a grim glance at Moon. "Eavesdropping makes me feel like I'm at least trying to do something."

"Ardan controls the traders?" Enad had said something about trade rights, that things would be better if the magisters gave them to more traders.

"Most of them. He controls their ability to find the island," Karsis corrected, and stepped out to watch Ardan move away. Moon thought she was being far too obvious about it. She must not do much hunting on her people's isolated plateau. "The leviathan moves at random. The traders all have magical tokens that allow them to find it again. They have a monopoly, and can charge whatever they like for their goods and foodstuffs."

"What about the other magisters?" Moon followed her. Ardan headed toward the far end of the room, past the pool and the fountain, where a set of stairs went up to a gallery along the back wall. There was an archway up there, surrounded by elaborate scrollwork carving, an entrance to another grand hall. Guards were posted, but Moon had assumed they were there to keep Ardan's involuntary guests from slipping away.

"Several of them have died off from old age, from what we've heard. Ardan is the most powerful." Karsis sounded bitter about it. "He seems to be instrumental in keeping the beast from sinking, or shaking the city off."

"But he can't put it to sleep again, or send it back to the coast of Emriat-terrene."

Karsis made a faint derisive noise. "Why would he bother? He has everything here just as he likes."

Ardan climbed the stairs to the gallery and vanished through the archway. "What's up there?"

She sighed. "Another exhibit hall full of his acquisitions. Those are apparently more precious to him than the ones downstairs." Her tone turned contemptuous. "I suppose you'll be helping him to add to it with this ruin of yours." She hesitated. "He will kill you, you know."

Moon's attention was on that tempting archway, so carefully

guarded. He turned to her abruptly. "Is that where he keeps the seed? The wooden thing you found?" His expression must have been too intense because she fell back a step.

Sounding uncertain for once, she said, "I don't know where he keeps it." She recovered quickly and lifted her chin. "Why do you want to know?"

Yes, why do you want to know? Idiot. He said, "I wanted to see it, make sure it's the same as what we found in the ruin."

"I see." She studied him a moment. "What do you know about these seeds?"

At that point, Esom arrived, saving Moon from an answer that probably would have been suspiciously inadequate. Esom took Karsis' arm firmly and said, "Karsis, Negal needs to speak to you."

"What? Oh—" Esom tugged and Karsis went reluctantly. Moon took the opportunity to vanish into the crowd. He had some planning to do.



Ardan's withdrawal must have been a signal, because it wasn't much later in the evening when the invited guests began to leave, and Bialin and his guards herded Moon and Negal's group back down to their quarters. As the stairwell doors were securely locked behind them, Negal turned to Moon and said, low-voiced, "Guards walk the halls at odd intervals. We are not locked in our rooms, but movement is discouraged."

That was good to know, and unexpectedly generous of Negal. Moon didn't want to feel like he owed these people anything, but he managed to thank Negal without irony.

Orlis and Karsis were already moving away down the hall, both seeming tired and dispirited. But as Negal went to join them, Esom stopped Moon and said, with stiff aggression, "And in case you found yourself curious, Karsis sleeps in my room."

Moon had no idea why he was being given this information. Hoping to discourage further disclosures, he said, deadpan, "That's nice for you."

Esom stiffened even further. Through gritted teeth, he said, "She's my sister."

It occurred to Moon, belatedly, that Esom was trying to warn him off approaching Karsis for sex. *Groundlings*, Moon thought in sour disgust. It must have shown on his face, because Esom's expression

turned defensive and confused. Moon just walked away toward his room.

He closed the door and sat down on the bed, wincing at the faint odor of scent-concealing oils that came up from the blankets. After all the smothering perfumes upstairs, his sense of smell was next to useless. He pulled his boots off, lay down, and waited.

Listening to the groundlings' conversations upstairs had netted a little more information. Ardan was more powerful than Moon had thought, and everyone there had been afraid of him, hating him, or courting him, or a combination of all three. Moon would have thought a magister's business was to make magic, but Ardan seemed intimately concerned with the working of the city and its trade concerns.

After a time, he heard the others stop moving around. Various doors shut. He hadn't noticed earlier how dead the tower was to sound; he could be the only one alive in it. He thought of the colony tree, how despite its size you could feel it move and breathe and rustle, sense the faint presence of all the smaller lives inside it. *Stop it*, he told himself, annoyed. He refused to be sick with longing for a place he had barely spent two nights in.

Sometime later, out in the foyer, the heavy door to the stairwell opened, someone walked through, and the door was closed and locked again. Quiet footsteps moved away down the hall. That was the guard who patrolled the public rooms on this level. There had been no click of a key, so another guard in the stairwell had unlocked and locked the door for him. But Moon wasn't planning to use the stairs.

Moon listened to the guard make several slow circuits of the level. Finally the man's steps returned to the stairwell door, there was a quiet knock, and the door opened and closed again. Presumably the guard wouldn't return for a while. Moon shoved off the bed and reached the door. He eased it open silently, stepped into the corridor, and pulled it shut behind him. The corridor lights had been turned down until they gave off only a dim light and a faint trace of mist. Shifting in a blur of motion, he bounded down the corridor. He kept his claws carefully sheathed so they wouldn't click against the tile and betray him.

The first thing he did was rapidly search the rest of this level. He found two other corridors, both with closed doors. By the sound of breathing, only three rooms were occupied. He couldn't tell which two held Negal and Orlis, but a low whispered conversation marked the one with Esom and Karsis. There were two other open sitting areas, and a larger room with a cold bathing pool, but no other doorways to the stairwell, and no windows.

He whipped back through the door into the big common room. The vapor-lights here were still bright, lighting the empty room and making him feel exposed to the entire tower. Ignoring the sensation, he went to the hearth, stepped over the rim, hooked his claws into the mortar between the sooty stones, and wriggled up into the chimney.

Climbing the dark shaft, he peered upward. His eyes adjusted quickly, but there wasn't much to see. The chimney wasn't straight and shunted sideways at intervals to work its way up through the tower. He passed openings for several other connected shafts, too narrow for even a slender Raksura to climb down. At least it was a sign that all the hearths in this side of the tower connected to this central shaft.

When he was high enough to be above the big meeting room, he hit a junction with another large shaft. *Hah*, he thought, quietly satisfied at guessing right, and climbed headfirst down it.

He reached the bottom, where it opened into the hearth near the far end of the large chamber. He hung his head down and peered cautiously out, every nerve alert.

The vapor-lights had been turned so low they were nearly out, and the place seemed even more cavernous, the statue-pillars looming life-like in the shadows. He tasted the air and caught lingering scents of perfume, stale food, and wine. Nothing moved, and it was almost unnervingly silent.

He slid out of the chimney and stepped down off the big empty hearth, lifting his spines a little to dislodge some of the soot. Ghosting across the marble floor, he bypassed the stairs to jump up to the railing of the gallery.

The hall beyond the archway was smaller than the one down on the second level of the tower, with no alcoves. Ardan's acquisitions hung on the walls or stood on plinths. It was all artwork, wall carvings, pieces of sculpture, the gems and metal glinting faintly in the dim light. Moon walked through rapidly, reached the end, then turned back. He forced himself to move slowly, to look at each display more closely. *It has to be here*. It wasn't sitting by itself on a plinth, but it might be stuck in with one of the other objects.

He stopped abruptly as the skin under his spines prickled with unease; he wasn't alone in here anymore. He turned, slowly.

Barely ten paces away a mist hung in the air, and something formed rapidly inside it.

Moon snarled under his breath. He had forgotten Ardan's magic.

Groundling guards were probably posted in any area where the inhabitants of the tower might move around during the night. In the chambers that were supposed to be empty, the guards could be more deadly. The mottled green shape that emerged from the mist stood almost as tall as Moon. He could see the outline of long arms and clawed hands, but no head. *That could be a problem*, he thought, and crouched to spring.

It snapped into solid form, a bulbous muscular body with barely a lump for the head. Its eyes were small, yellow, and mean. Then a huge mouth opened, more than half the width of the body, and displayed an impressive array of yellow fangs. It surged forward and Moon sprang to meet it.

As it reached for him he grabbed its arm, swung up and slashed its face with his feet and free hand, then leapt away. Quicker than thought, it slapped him out of the air.

Moon bounced off the stone floor, then caught a blow to the head that knocked him back into a plinth. The creature charged toward him again, its goal apparently to grab him and stuff him into its huge mouth. Scrambling back, he thought, *I don't have time for this*, and bolted out through the archway to the gallery. Instead of going over the balustrade, he jumped straight up in the air. As the creature barreled out after him, he dropped and landed on its back. It roared, loud enough to deafen him, and reached back to claw at his head. Moon sunk all four sets of his own claws into the creature's rubbery flesh and bit down on the back of its lumpy head.

Still roaring, it staggered forward and tumbled over the rail. It hit the floor first and rolled, but Moon held on with grim determination. Even as it crushed him between its back and the floor, he kept his jaws clamped down. Its tough hide gave way abruptly and he got a mouth full of foul blood. The thing tasted terrible, like rot and mold. It bucked, thrashed, and finally went limp. Moon shoved it off him and staggered upright. He spat out blood, stumbled to the fountain, and scooped up a double handful of water to scrub the acrid stuff off his face. Then he looked up at the gallery.

Three—no, four more misty shapes formed in the air. The creature's death must have triggered the appearance of reinforcements. *Damn things, how many does Ardan have?* He could stay here and take them all on, until the groundling guards and Ardan showed up. It wouldn't buy him any time to look for the seed. He turned back for the hearth and crossed the floor in long bounds.

A groundling couldn't have killed that creature. If Moon got down to the guest quarters again and shifted, he might be able to bluff this

out. They wouldn't know they were looking for a Raksura. He hoped.

He reached the hearth, scrambled up into the chimney, and climbed rapidly back to the central shaft. At the junction he hesitated. He could keep going up until he found the outlet to the outside, if it was large enough to get through, if it wasn't sealed by the barrier that protected the outside of the tower. No, he had to take the chance to stay and keep looking for the seed.

He climbed down quickly and quietly until he heard a scrabbling noise, claws scratching against stone, somewhere above him. Moon continued to climb, and tasted the air as he went, but the stink from the creature's hide still clung to his scales and he couldn't scent anything. He glanced down and saw he didn't have far to go. Faint light marked the opening into the guest-level hearth perhaps twenty paces below him.

Then he heard a bang and a loud crack, and looked up to see a dark shape descending rapidly toward him. One of the creatures was in the shaft. Moon gasped a curse and dropped. He plunged down and caught himself just at the bottom of the chimney.

As he stood in the hearth, he saw the creature stop abruptly, still some distance above him. *The stupid thing is stuck*, he thought incredulously. And it was cutting off any chance of retreat up through the shaft. Hissing in frustration, he ducked to climb down out of the hearth basin.

At just that moment he heard voices and footsteps, about to turn through the door into the common room. By instinct Moon shifted. But when his claws vanished, he lost his footing on the edge of the hearth and tumbled to the floor.

Esom and Karsis stepped into the doorway just in time to see Moon roll across the tile. They stopped, staring. Esom demanded, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Moon sat up on one elbow and glanced warily back at the hearth. A little soot trickled down, but no creature appeared. It must be jammed tightly in the shaft.

"Were you—" Karsis looked at the hearth, then at Moon, obviously taking in the soot stains on his clothes and hands. At least his face wasn't covered with monster blood, though there had to be flecks of it all over him. He had been counting on a chance to thoroughly clean off his scales in his room before he shifted. She shook her head in disbelief at her own theory. "You couldn't have been—"

“What do you mean, nothing?” Esom persisted. “Why were you standing on the—”

Moon pushed to his feet, half-ready to answer Esom’s question by hitting him in the head. Then far down the hall the stairwell door crashed open. He heard shouts and footsteps as the guards swarmed in. *That’s that*, Moon thought. He couldn’t retreat up the chimney, and there was no other way out of this level. He should have tried to go up and out when he had the chance. He said, quietly, “Get away from me.”

“What?” Esom blinked in confusion but Karsis took his arm and tugged him back.

Several guards burst into the room, their javelins and small crossbow weapons held ready. They all looked angry, and the anger had an even more dangerous tinge of fear. “Was it here? Did you see it?” one shouted. Others raced by in the hall toward the other guest quarters.

“See what?” Esom said, sounding affronted. “We’ve been locked up here. Of course we didn’t see anything!”

Then the guards hastily made way and Ardan walked into the room. Moon had expected him to be angry, but Ardan’s expression was grimly pleased. The realization was like a dash of icy water. *He suspected all along*, Moon thought, eyes narrowed. *And now he knows.*

Watching Moon carefully, Ardan said, “So you’ve been exploring. I wonder why.”

Karsis said quickly, “No, he was in his room, we went there to speak to him. We came out here to talk—”

“Quiet.” Ardan didn’t spare her a glance.

Moon bared his teeth in something that might possibly be interpreted as a smile. “You don’t look surprised.”

“Let’s say I was hopeful.” Ardan’s smile was dry. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

Another groundling came down the hall, light footsteps at a deliberate pace. The guards stirred uneasily.

“It’s him,” Esom muttered and glanced toward the door in fearful anticipation. “That’s all we need.”

Karsis said, low-voiced, to Moon, “Watch out, he’s dangerous. He’s not what he seems—”

Moon stopped listening when the newcomer stepped into the

doorway. He was younger than Moon, with a slim build, light bronze skin, and dark hair, sharp features. He wore a loose light shirt and dark brown pants of the local fishskin cloth, but his feet were bare.

Despite it all, Moon had a moment of doubt. Then their eyes met and he knew for certain. *Well, that does explain a lot*, he thought, suddenly cold with fury. How Ardan had found the tree, how he had known about the seed. He hadn't even needed a flying ship to get inside the colony tree's high knothole entrance.

The man turned to Ardan, fury twisting his handsome features. "Why didn't you tell me about this? Were you planning to play us off each other? Get rid of me?"

Ardan turned to him in fond exasperation. "Of course not. I wasn't certain what he was. I wanted to be sure before I told you." Of course Ardan had suspected Moon all along; with a live Raksura in groundling form at hand to compare him to, he could hardly help but be suspicious. Add to that Moon's knowledge of the mysterious ruin, his questions about the seed. Ardan looked at Moon. "This is Rift, my friend and guide." He managed the Raksuran pronunciation without difficulty. "I assume your name is not Niran."

"It's Moon, of the Indigo Cloud Court." Karsis and Esom stared at him, Karsis in astonished realization and Esom in growing horror. "That's the colony tree you stole the seed from."

Rift twitched, and hissed. "You're lying. It was empty. It was a dead court."

"It's not empty now," Moon said. "You led him to the seed, you know what that means."

Ardan watched them with a narrow, speculative gaze. He said, "Rift, calm yourself. I thought you would be pleased, to have another member of your race here."

Moon snorted. Ardan obviously didn't know as much about Raksura as he thought.

Rift grimaced in disgust at Ardan. He shifted, his groundling body vanishing in a dark mist, resolving into a warrior with dark green scales. He flared out his spines, and snarled in Raksuran, "You're lying. That colony tree was abandoned. I don't know what you want here, but if you want to live, go away. Now."

Moon barred his teeth. *He thinks he's looking at another warrior*. In groundling form, it was hard to tell young consorts from male warriors. Until it was too late. Moon said, "Come and get me."

Rift sprang toward him. Moon shifted, flared his spines out, and

lunged forward. They grappled, tumbled across the room, slammed down onto a bench, bounced off a pillar supporting the chimney. Moon was bigger, stronger, and much more angry. He barely felt the smaller warrior's claws.

Around them, groundlings shouted and fled. Rift's growls went up in pitch as he realized he was overmatched. Wrenching free, Rift tried to bolt. Moon caught him again and flung him toward the knot of guards in the opposite doorway. They scattered as the warrior slammed through them. Claws scraping the floor, Rift scrambled away down the corridor. Moon jumped over two fallen guards, bounced off the ceiling, and pelted after him. Moon was peripherally aware of running, shouting, confusion, but the only thing he could see was Rift.

Rift slammed through an archway into another small sitting room just as Moon caught him. He grabbed Rift's spines and yanked him around. Rift clawed for Moon's eyes but Moon slammed him down to the floor. Kneeling on the warrior's chest, he seized him by the throat. Then Rift croaked, "Don't. Please."

Moon, just about to tighten his grip and rip Rift's throat out, growled in pure frustration. He was breathing hard, his skin stinging from scratches on his hands, arms, and chest that had penetrated his scales. Rift's eyes pleaded, and Moon couldn't kill him. "Where's the seed?"

He gasped, "I don't know. He took it away, out of the tower— Watch out!"

Moon twisted in time to see a guard in the doorway, lifting his little crossbow. Moon snapped out his right wing in a sharp punch. He struck the man in the chest with the tip and flung him backward.

Taking advantage of the moment of distraction, Rift said quickly, "I'll show you the way out, through the bottom of the tower. The barrier stops at the ground."

Shouts and crashing echoed from up the corridor. Ardan shouted, "Where are they?"

"You swear it's not here," Moon hissed.

"I swear." Rift's eyes burned with sincerity. "He took it away somewhere."

There wasn't much of a choice. Moon let Rift go and rolled to his feet. More guards rushed the door, and Moon slammed through them, knocking them sprawling. Rift jumped over his head, clung to the ceiling, then leapt down the hall. Moon tore after him and rounded the corner just as a chorus of crossbow bolts clattered against the

stone wall.

He caught up with Rift in the foyer as three of the bulbous guardcreatures barreled in through the stairwell doorway. Rift threw himself at the first, hands and feet ripping at its face. The other two tried to crowd past. Moon jumped and landed on top of the first one's head. He slashed at the clawed hands that reached for him and dove forward, over their heads and out the doorway. Out in the stairwell, he whipped around and ripped open the back of the one still trapped in the door. All three creatures roared. Ardan's groundling guards, stuck in the foyer with their path blocked, shouted. Then Rift tore his way out over the creatures' heads.

Rift bounded down the stairs, Moon right behind him. But Rift turned off at the next landing and slammed through a door. Moon hesitated. It led into a foyer and hall not much different from the one they had just escaped. Rift stopped to whisper, "This way—we can't go down the main stairs. He'll order his men to shoot us."

Moon's nerves were as tight as wire at the idea of trusting Rift, but he heard the guard-creatures clumping down the stairs, and there was no time to argue. He ducked through the door, dragged it closed behind him, and ran after Rift.

They passed more doors, a confusing maze of empty rooms, then Rift took a smaller door into a plain room that held only a big iron stove. It was almost as tall as Moon, but cold and dusty with disuse.

Rift climbed up to stand atop it, and explained, "This makes heat for the bathing rooms above. They only use it when it gets cold."

A copper-sheathed chimney led up from it, and for a moment Moon thought Rift meant them to escape through that. It looked far too small and it was going the wrong direction. But there was a grate in the wall behind it, and Rift pried it open with his claws. It opened into a much larger shaft that led down through the wall of the tower. A cool breeze flowed from it, carrying the faint odors of outside air. "This is for ventilation," Rift said as he climbed inside. "Ardan doesn't know I've been down here."

"Then why didn't you escape before?" Moon followed him reluctantly. There were so many things he didn't like about this that he couldn't settle on which was the worst.

Rift hung from chinks in the wall, let Moon get through and then, one-handed, he tugged the grate back into place. "I didn't have anywhere to go."

Moon helped him pull the grate closed, which left the shaft with

only the small amount of dappled vapor-light that shone through the bars. “What court are you from?”

Rift eyed him uncertainly as he clung to the grate. “I don’t have a court. I was traveling alone.”

Moon’s spines snapped up, his first impulse a renewed fury. *He’s lying, he’s lying to make me think*—Except Rift couldn’t know anything about Moon’s past.

Rift shrunk back against the wall at Moon’s reaction. Moon made himself lean back, settle his spines. He started to climb down and after a moment, Rift hurried to catch up. Moon asked, “How did you get here?”

Rift hesitated, as if afraid to provoke another angry reaction. It was already too dark to read his expression. He answered, “I came here a couple of turns ago, not by choice. I was traveling along the eastern shore and got caught in a storm. I got blown out to sea and couldn’t fly against the wind. I was exhausted, about to fall out of the sky, and I saw a trading ship. I landed on it. They locked me in the hold, chained me up, and brought me here to sell me to Ardan.” He took a sharp breath. “I know I should have let myself drown, but I wanted to live.”

Moon had wanted to give up more times than he could remember, and he was ten turns older than Rift, at least. He muttered, “You shouldn’t have let yourself drown.” He heard Rift miss a handhold and scramble to recover. Moon added, “You’re lucky Ardan didn’t stuff you and stick you in his exhibit.”

“He had other plans,” Rift said, still sounding wary.

Moon clamped his claws into the stone and waited until Rift drew even with him. Going by sound and instinct, he grabbed Rift’s shoulder and felt the young warrior’s spines flatten into instant submission. He said, “You went to the Reaches with him. You led him to the Indigo Cloud tree. You could have escaped any time while the groundlings were traveling through the forest.”

Rift wriggled to get away, then made himself stop. He said tightly, “I didn’t want to leave him then. He was kind to me. He helped me.”

“You’re eager to leave him now.”

Rift sounded genuinely anguished. “I’d been to that colony tree ten times over the turns, I used to shelter there. That court must have been gone for generations—”

Moon let go of him and started down again. Rift’s story cut far too

close to the bone. “It was. But they were attacked by Fell. They— We had to move back to the colony tree.”

Rift caught up with him, his claws scraping the wall. “You’re a consort. What are you doing here alone?”

Moon didn’t answer, and Rift froze for a moment in startled realization. “You’re not alone. There are others.”

Chapter Twelve

Not much further down the air shaft, they reached a grate that opened into a small dim room, most of it blocked by the bulk of another stove. Unlike the one on the upper floor, it was giving off warmth, and it smelled faintly of fish oil. “This way,” Rift said, tugging at the grate.

Moon set his claws in a crack in the wall and looked down. The scents of outdoor air still came from below them. “There’s a way out further down.”

“It’s too small. And the warding barrier blocks it, like the big doors on the ground floor.” Rift eased the grate open and climbed out to clamber over the stove. “We have to get to a passage under the tower.”

Moon growled in the back of his throat, mostly in frustration. He believed in the barrier outside the tower. After running into it yesterday, he knew how effective it was. But he wanted to get out of here and figure out where the seed was before Ardan moved it again.

He climbed out after Rift, over the top of the big metal stove. It was hot, but not enough to burn Raksuran scales. The pipes from it led into the dirty patched walls, not up through the ceiling. It might be keeping the air in the exhibit hall dry to help preserve Ardan’s collection.

Rift jumped from the top of the stove to land near the heavy door. He opened it just enough to peer out. Easing up behind him, Moon stretched to see over his head. The door opened into a gray stone corridor, high-ceilinged and a little better lit. They were somewhere under the main stairwell, on the second level. Moon caught the distinctive odor of decay from the stuffed specimens in the exhibit hall.

Rift slipped out and led the way through a maze of hallways, passing closed doors. They came out on a little balcony and crouched to see over the heavy balustrade. It overlooked the shadowy first floor hall, lit by only a few vapor-lamps. They were distressingly close to the angry face of the giant waterling. Its dead, frozen eyes gleamed in the dim light, its fanged mouth a dark cavern.

Moon sensed movement immediately, and spotted one of the bulbous guard-creatures on the floor below. The thing paced back and forth not far from the bottom of the long sweep of stairs, half-hidden by the bulk of the waterling's tail. Making an impatient snuffling noise, it looked and sounded exactly as if it was casting for a scent, but no one else moved in the shadows.

Rift leaned close and said in a breathless whisper, "Someone's down there. The wardens don't appear unless someone comes into the area they're guarding."

Rift was right. If the thing had appeared in response to their arrival, it would know where they were. And it seemed certain there was someone near the stairs. Moon whispered back, "We have to get through that room?"

Rift jerked his chin toward the far end of the hall. "The door is behind those stairs."

Moon motioned Rift to stay back and eased up to perch on the railing, watching the warden pace. This would be tricky. As soon as they killed the thing, it would trigger the appearance of others and likely send some sort of warning to Ardan.

Moon waited until the creature moved out of sight, his view of it blocked by the waterling's right tailfin. Then he jumped, landed on the waterling's back, and ran lightly down its body. The decaying scales squished unpleasantly underfoot. Peering over the side of the tail, he saw the guard-creature standing at the base of the stairs. Its arms were out and it was moving slowly forward, as if trying to corner something. *Except nothing's there*, Moon thought. At least nothing he could see at the moment.

He made a sharp gesture at Rift. Rift vaulted the balcony railing, landed on the floor, and snapped his wings out for maximum noise. The guard-creature whipped around toward him and Moon leapt to land right on its oversized head.

The creature staggered and roared, clawed for him, and he ripped, tore, and wrenched. Rift hit it an instant later and tore its legs out from under it. The thing collapsed.

Moon shoved away from it, letting Rift finish it off. He turned toward the stairs and the supposedly empty shadow. Cautiously he tasted the air, but between the decaying waterling and the dying creature, scent was useless. But instinct told him something was there, something was occupying space that should be taken up by air.

He lunged forward, slapped at the shadow, and hit solid flesh. A

groundling yelped, and suddenly Esom and Karsis sprawled on the steps.

Moon snarled. "So you're a shaman, too." The two had been using some sort of spell to conceal themselves. They must have used it to slip away from the guest level in the confusion and flee, while Ardan searched for Moon and Rift. He tilted his head toward Esom. "Is that what 'deviser' means?"

Karsis struggled to sit up, shoving her brother off her. Esom stumbled to his feet, "You can't stop us, we—"

"No time," Rift told Moon as he shook the creature's blood off his scales. A clatter sounded from overhead as groundling guards ran across the second level hall to this stairwell. At least two misty shapes forming in the air nearby meant more wardens were about to appear. Rift started toward the curving passage that led under the stairwell.

"Come on," Moon snapped at Esom and Karsis, knowing if he left them behind, they would point the way for the guards.

Fortunately they didn't argue. Esom pulled Karsis up and they both ran after Moon.

The passage wound under the bulk of the stairwell, apparently a back way to the service areas behind the hall. Rift stopped at a spot where there wasn't a door, just a carved panel that looked like part of the wall decoration. But there was a faint line of mold along one edge, showing that there must be something behind it. Rift grabbed the edge, worked his claws under it, and popped it open.

It led into a dark space lit by greenish light that released a breath of dank air carrying a truly foul odor. Rift stepped inside, Moon pushed Karsis and Esom in after him, then stepped through himself.

Moon helped Rift maneuver the panel back into place. There was no lock. He looked hurriedly around the small space. The dim greenish light came from odd little pockets in the stone walls; it was hard to tell if it had been intentionally placed there or was just a lichen or moss that grew naturally. There was nothing to wedge against the panel, nothing to keep the guards from prying it open once they realized it was an escape route.

"We can't seal it," Rift told him, low-voiced. "We need to move away, or the wardens will hear us."

"Can Ardan send those things after us?" Moon asked in Raksuran. They started down the passage, which sloped downward in a long spiral. Karsis slipped a little on the slimy paving but caught Esom's shoulder to steady herself. Both of them watched Rift warily.

Rift replied in the same language, “He can send them, but he has to figure out where we went, first. They can’t appear out of nowhere. He has to put the guard-spells for them in place. I don’t think he knows about these passages.”

“You don’t think.” That wasn’t reassuring, but then nothing about Rift was. “How did you find the way down here without killing the guardthings in the main hall?” That would have had to alert Ardan that Rift had been poking around down here.

“I found it during the day,” Rift said. He jerked his head toward Esom and Karsis. “What are we going to do with them?”

That “we” was awfully confident. Switching back to Kedaic, Moon asked Esom, “If you’re a shaman, why didn’t you escape before?”

Stiffly, Esom said, “I’ve tried, but I knew the wardens would stop us. As you saw, the sight-spell doesn’t work very well on them.”

“We weren’t very organized,” Karsis admitted. “We tried to get Negal and Orlis, but the guards had already locked them in. And we aren’t even certain where Ardan is keeping our other crew members.” “How were you planning to get through the barrier?”

Esom started to speak, then hesitated, and Moon saw Karsis dart a look at him. Esom said, “With all the confusion, I thought we might be able to conceal ourselves down here until morning, when the barrier goes down and the outside doors are opened.”

They were terrible liars. “Hide from that creature till morning? I don’t think so. I think you knew you could get through the barrier.”

The two groundlings exchanged a grim look, and Esom said, “All right, yes. I think I can get through the barrier, but I’m not certain. I’ve never had a chance to escape from the upper level and test it.”

Rift told Moon, “I knew he was a wizard all along, but he can’t do much. He’s not nearly as powerful as Ardan.”

Esom stopped abruptly and stared at Rift. He said, “You knew?”

Karsis demanded, more to the point, “Why didn’t you tell Ardan?”

Rift bared a fang in an ironic smile. “I’m not Ardan’s servant.”

Esom sneered back. “So you’re his pet?”

Growling, Rift reached toward him and Esom jerked back. Moon hissed and flicked his spines. Rift glared resentfully, but eased away from Esom.

Esom looked from Rift to Moon, then wet his lips and said, “If you don’t help us escape, we’ll tell Ardan’s men which way you went.”

Karsis cleared her throat, a little embarrassed. Apparently she had seen the flaw in her brother's plan. Moon said, "Or we could just kill you."

Esom blinked, then grimaced. Karsis elbowed him and he glared at her. "All right, fine." He took a deep breath. "I think I know where the seed is, the one you've been asking about, that Ardan took from the giant tree. I'm not certain, but I have a good idea."

That was different. Moon took a step nearer, looming over him. "Where?"

Esom lifted his chin and squared his shoulders, the groundling equivalent of lifting his spines. "I want your promise to help us escape, and to help us get our friends away from Ardan."

Moon thought it over fast, flicking his spines. "I can take you out of here with us now, but I can't go back for your friends. Ardan will search the city for us and there's no way we can get back inside this tower." That might or might not be true, but he wasn't going to make promises he couldn't keep.

Esom looked at Karsis, who gave him a helpless shrug and said, "At least we'd be free to try to help the others."

Esom, jaw set and ready to argue, visibly deflated. "All right, I'll —"

A thump somewhere above interrupted him. Rift twitched in alarm. "They're coming."

"Come on, move." Moon gave Rift a push and started away down the passage. Motioning Karsis and Esom to follow, he whispered, "You keep talking."

Keeping his voice low, Esom said rapidly, "When we first arrived in the city, Ardan let us explore at will. Towards the front of the creature, near a flooded valley where its left front leg dips down, there's a domed building that looked as if it had some important purpose. Negal and I went there. Part of it is apparently used as some sort of mortuary temple, but the public area was covered with carvings showing what seemed to be early magisters taking control of the leviathan by placing an object in contact with its body. These carvings led toward a doorway, with a stairwell down. Guards prevented us from going any further, but..." He hesitated, and Karsis nudged him impatiently. "Part of my ability... I can see and feel emanations from magical artifacts. That's how I found the metora stone to power our vessel, the *Klodifore*. And I'm sure there's something down there, some source of magic," Esom finished.

Moon managed not to hiss impatiently. He was glad he hadn't made them any extravagant promises in a moment of weakness. "Ardan didn't have the seed then. Why do you think it's there now?"

Esom said, "On the journey through the forest, he kept talking about how urgent this was, that the survival of the city depended on it, that they were in danger of losing control of the leviathan."

Karsis added, "When we reached the tree, we only spent one day there. Once he found the seed, he wanted to leave immediately."

Esom continued, "We haven't seen the seed since we got back to the city. It stands to reason, if he wanted it to help him and the other magisters with the leviathan, it must be in that building, in the place where they control the creature."

If it was a lie, it was an odd one. Esom could have said the seed was still in the tower, to trick Moon into going back for his friends.

Then Rift said, "He's right. Ardan took it there the day we got back from the Reaches."

Moon stared at him. He said through gritted teeth, "You said you didn't know where it was."

Rift turned back to give Moon a look of impatient innocence. "I knew it wasn't in the tower. I didn't want to waste time trying to convince you to leave."

Moon switched to Raksuran to say, pointedly, "If you knew this, why did you let me make a bargain with him?" He would have taken Esom and Karsis out with them anyway, as long as they were here, but he wanted to know what Rift was playing at.

Rift paused at an intersection in the passage, where another ramp spiraled more steeply down. The flow of damp, foul-smelling air hadn't increased, but Moon could hear the growing sound of rushing wind, rising and falling in oddly regular gusts. In the same language, Rift said, as if it was obvious, "We don't need them. You don't have to keep the bargain."

This was an interesting insight into Rift's thought processes. Moon said, "If you expect me to trust you, you might want to stop lying and betraying people in front of me."

Rift twitched, watched him uncertainly, then turned to lead the way down the ramp.

Moon couldn't trust what Rift told him and he couldn't trust Esom and Karsis, but with all three together, he might be able to get something close to the truth out of them. Though if Esom had really

concealed his power from Ardan all this time, he was a better liar than Moon would have thought.

Running footsteps from somewhere far up the passage suggested that Ardan's men had found the panel and opened it. They didn't have much time.

Two more spirals down, and the ramp ended in a low-ceilinged chamber, sparsely lit with the green mold, with a large round hole in the center of the floor. Moon stepped to the edge. The shaft plunged more than a hundred paces down, the bottom lost in the dim greenish light. The wind sound came from somewhere below, and the smell was horrific.

"Down there," Rift said. He glanced worriedly back up the ramp. "We need to hurry."

Esom and Karsis exchanged an appalled look. *Wonderful*, Moon thought, privately agreeing with them. To Rift he said, "You take her, I'll take—"

"No," Esom interrupted. He told Moon, "You take Karsis."

It was an interesting point, that Esom felt his sister was safer with Moon, another Raksura and a stranger, than Rift. In Raksuran, Moon said to Rift, "I want them both alive. Drop him, and I'll gut you."

Rift hissed in exasperation. "I won't. I told you, I want to help you."

Moon caught Karsis around the waist and jumped down into the shaft to catch the edge one-handed. She made a noise like a short shriek and grabbed his shoulders. His claws hooked on a gap in the mortar, Moon said, "Put your arms around my neck and hold on. Watch the spines, they're sharp."

"Yes, I see." Karsis wound her arms around his neck, holding on tightly. Moon planted his feet on the wall and pushed off, falling to catch hold of another gap further down. Karsis' shriek was closer to a strangled yelp that time. "Sorry," she gasped.

Moon glanced up, saw that Rift had Esom and hung from the upper ledge. Moon cautiously let go of Karsis, made certain she had a firm hold on him, and began to climb down the wall.

Keeping his voice low, Moon said, "Tell me about Rift."

She whispered, "We didn't know what he was, at first. He came on the voyage to the forest coast with Ardan and his other men. Ardan said Rift would be our guide. He didn't reveal himself until Ardan needed his help to force us to keep going inland." She hesitated, then

added, “We thought he was one of a kind, a...”

“Monster,” Moon finished for her.

“Yes, until we reached the tree and saw the artwork. It looked as if it had been abandoned for ages. We didn’t— And even Ardan and Rift didn’t think anyone lived there anymore.”

“It wasn’t abandoned, just... waiting.” The last thing he wanted at the moment was an apology. “Where is Rift from?”

“He’s never said.” She gasped as he had to drop for the next handhold, but recovered quickly. “Is it important?”

Moon couldn’t answer that right now either. He wanted Rift to be from a rival court, a place hostile to Indigo Cloud. He wanted him to be in the power of the Fell. “Why didn’t you mention that Ardan had a pet Raksura?”

“Ardan has six members of our crew locked up somewhere in the tower. He said if we spoke about Rift to anyone he’d order them killed. We know he’s serious. Five of our crew tried to escape in the forest, and he had them executed. He let Rift kill three of his own men when we were at the tree.”

That explained the bones left behind in the root passage. “What for?”

“Rift caught the men destroying some of the wall carvings, trying to take the inset gems.”

Moon snarled under his breath, incredulous. “What?” Karsis asked nervously.

“He showed Ardan how to take the seed; that’s killing the tree. Those carvings were all going to rot away with the rest of the tree without it.” If Rift knew where to find the seed in its hidden cradle in the colony tree, then he had to know what it was, what it meant to cut it out.

“I see,” Karsis muttered. “Or, I don’t see. I don’t understand his thinking.”

That makes two of us. The stench was getting worse; Moon couldn’t have scented a major kethel if it was breathing down his neck. The regular rush of wind grew louder as well. Moon reached the bottom of the shaft and hung there, trying to see what lay below.

The drop was about two hundred paces to an uneven surface that looked like pitted and scarred paving. Heavy round pillars and blocky columns supported the foundations of the tower. In the dim green light he could see they were heavily covered with patchy molds and

odd dark growths. Rift and Esom arrived just above them, and Esom said, “Karsis, are you all right?”

“Quiet!” Karsis snapped, before Moon could. He listened intently to the wind. It had been repeating the same pattern the entire time they had climbed down the shaft: the sound would stop, there would be a long low rush, like something drawing breath, then it resumed. *Like something drawing breath*, Moon thought. *Right*.

Karsis whispered, “That’s not what I think it is, is it?”

“The leviathan. We’re right above its back.” Now that Moon knew what he was looking at, he could see that the pitted, scarred paving was actually the giant scaled hide of the leviathan.

Karsis made a noise eloquent of disgust.

From above them, Rift whispered, “It’s all right to walk on it. Its hide is too thick, it won’t feel us.”

“How do you know that?” Esom asked.

Rift didn’t reply, and Moon said, tightly, “Answer him.”

Rift said in annoyance, “I’ve been down here before. How do you think I knew the way?”

“That’s reassuring,” Moon said under his breath. He would just have to trust Rift now and beat the truth out of him later.

Holding on with one hand, Moon wrapped his arm around Karsis’ waist again. Then he let go of the wall. As they dropped he snapped out his wings to soften the fall. They landed on one of the big scales. He was braced to leap back up to the shaft, but nothing happened. The whistling rush of the creature’s breathing continued undisturbed.

He set Karsis on her feet. It took her a moment to unclench her hands from his collar flanges, and she wobbled on the uneven surface. He turned and scanned the dark space. It went on for a long distance. Apparently this area was the underpinnings of the city. It wouldn’t be the leviathan they had to worry about, but the parasites that might live down here, feeding off the garbage dropped from the buildings above and the growths on the leviathan’s hide. The creature’s stench made Moon effectively scent-blind, and the rush of its breathing masked slight sounds of movement.

Rift dropped to the ground a few paces away, and dumped Esom on his feet. Esom staggered into Moon, jerked away, then self-consciously straightened his jacket. Rift pointed roughly east, back toward the tail of the creature. “That way. There’s a passage to the outside up there.”

“Lead the way,” Moon said, pointedly.

Rift flattened his spines in a way that suggested he was hurt at Moon’s distrust, and started away through the shadows. Moon controlled the urge to slap him in the head and followed.

It was a long walk, nearly half the length of the city. They had to go at the pace of the two groundlings, who were moving as fast as they could, but the rough scales made for uneven and difficult footing. The vast support pillars loomed overhead, blossoming with ugly, bulbous growths, and several times they crossed broad, slimy trails, though they never saw the creatures that were leaving them. There were also gray shapes clinging to the ceiling that looked like giant tree frogs, like the ones in the suspended forest. They might be just as harmless, but Moon doubted it on principle. Nothing attacked them, but Raksura were different and unexpected enough that the predators here might be cautious. For now, at least.

Ardan’s men would have had to fetch ropes to get down the shaft, so they had a good lead by the time Moon caught the sound of voices. And unless Ardan had a way to magically detect them, there was nothing to show which way they had gone.

Finally the space around them became more closed-in, the foundation pillars and supports much closer together.

“There it is,” Rift said, “Do you smell it?”

“Smell what?” Esom asked, stumbling.

“Fresh air,” Moon told him. It was a draft scented of outside air, damp and fresh, an intense relief after the leviathan’s stench. “There’s an opening somewhere ahead.”

“Finally.” Esom wiped sweat off his forehead. “I thought we were going to be stuck down here forever.”

“I’d prefer it to going back to Ardan,” Karsis added.

“Now do you trust me?” Rift said.

“We’ll see.” Moon had no intention of committing himself on that point.

Finally they were close enough for Moon to actually see the opening. The chamber narrowed to end at a bulwark of heavy stones, and there was an irregular patch of lighter darkness about midway up, just above a mound of rubble.

But as they drew closer, Moon realized he could hear something else besides the rushing wind of the leviathan’s breath. It was a deep, hollow sound, regular and even. “Do you hear that?” he asked the

others. His first thought was that it was something the leviathan was doing, though he didn't even want to guess what bodily function could produce that sound.

Rift stopped to listen, then said, startled, "It's the bell. The warning bell. The leviathan's going to move."

Esom swore in a strange language, then added in Kedaic, "There's no telling how long it's been ringing."

The magisters' enspelled bell, that rang to warn the city that the leviathan was about to move. It would call the fishers to lift their boats out of the water and the traders to cast off. Moon said, "How long does it—"

The ground lurched under him; he and Rift swayed, using their foot claws to stay upright. Esom and Karsis both stumbled and fell.

The whole underground shook, moss and debris rained down from the ceiling. Beneath them the leviathan's hide pulsed and shuddered. Moon leaned down, caught Karsis around the waist, and started up the pile of rubble. Rift followed, hauling Esom with him.

At the top, they climbed out through the jagged gap into a windy night, alive with the crash of the surf. There were hanging vapor-lights below them, rocking wildly with the leviathan's motion. Moon squinted to see, realizing they were at the far edge of the city. A giant stone bulwark rose up behind them, and the leviathan's immense tail stretched out below, like the surface of a reef. It moved now, migrating back and forth across the waves and tossing up fountains of spray as the creature swam.

"What do we do now?" Karsis shouted in his ear.

The leviathan moved at a good speed, but not faster than a Raksura could fly. The sky was starting to gray towards the east and they didn't have much darkness left. They would be fighting the wind the whole way, but they had to go now. Moon turned to Rift, and shouted, "You take him, and follow me."

Esom's "Where are we going—" was cut off with a yelp as Rift grabbed him. Moon tightened his hold on Karsis, snapped his wings out, and jumped into the wind.

Both he and Rift were blown backwards, out over the moving tail. Hard flaps took them back over the creature's hindquarters, Moon leading Rift upward to gain altitude.

Moon played his wings against the wind, riding it to keep moving forward. Karsis clung to him, her hands gripping his collar flanges tightly, and buried her face against his scales. A few vapor-lights were

lit in the streets and in the windows of the towers, but the city looked empty; everyone must be huddling inside.

Moon banked away to avoid the area near Ardan's tower. The wind drove him further than he intended, and he skirted the harbor. It was empty of the big trading ships, the pontoon docks churning up waves as they were dragged through the water. Little fishing boats swung from the cages that had lifted them to safety. The metal ship, the *Klodifore*, had been moved close to the dock, but was still floating... *No, it's hovering*, Moon thought, realizing it had no wake. When the bell had started to sound, Ardan must have sent someone to the harbor to raise the ship.

He fought the wind to curve toward the abandoned tower where he and Stone had camped.

The wind sheared around the roof of the tower and Moon made a dive for the open terrace on the top floor. He made it and bounced lightly off the tower wall. Rift managed it too, though he bounced a little harder and staggered across the terrace.

Moon stepped between the columns into the shelter of the big room, expecting to find an impatient Stone. It was too dark to see much, but the Raksuran figure waiting there was much smaller. It said, "Moon?"

"Song?" It couldn't be Song, except it was. Startled and a little appalled, he set Karsis on her feet. "What are you doing here?"

Song explained, "Pearl sent us. We caught up with Jade and the others late yesterday, and just reached this place a little while ago. Stone saw us and guided us here. They're all downstairs. Why do you have a groundling—" Rift stepped in and Esom staggered after him. Startled, Song stared at him. "Who's that?"

Rift hesitated, then stepped back toward the balcony. "No," Moon said sharply.

Rift quivered, on the verge of bolting. If he fled, Moon would have to catch him again, if the wind whipping around the tower didn't kill them both. On impulse, he shifted to groundling. It was Raksuran etiquette that when the highest-ranking person shifted to groundling, everyone around them did as well. Song followed suit immediately, and Rift, by habit too ingrained to break, shifted too.

Moon reached, caught Rift's wrist, and towed him toward the door. He could deal with Esom and Karsis later.

They passed Root in the dim stairwell; he was hanging from the ceiling. He saw them and shouted, "Moon! Moon's back!"

Light shone up from the room on the level just below, and Moon heard familiar voices raised in argument. It was an interior room, no windows, so no one venturing out into the streets would see suspicious light from an abandoned and inaccessible tower.

Moon stepped into the doorway. Some broken tiles had been spelled for light and tucked into various wall niches, so he could clearly see Stone, Jade, Chime, Vine, Balm, and Flower. But the other three warriors were Floret, Drift, and River, which was a surprise of a whole different kind. *I can't believe Pearl sent River*, he thought incredulously. *That's all we need.*

He couldn't believe they were here at all. It was a bad idea, it was going to cause trouble, and Jade should have waited before leading the warriors to the leviathan. But Moon couldn't help a warm swell of relief at seeing them all. He said, "I thought you gave us three days."

Everyone's attention snapped to the doorway. Jade stared. "Moon —"

Moon said, "This is Rift. He helped Ardan get the seed, and he's going to help us get it back."

□

Esom and Karsis sat on a marble bench built out from the wall, watching nervously, but then the conversation was in Raksuran. Rift's presence had caused some awkwardness. Most of the others had stared at him, then looked away. Stone hadn't betrayed any reaction, and Balm was expressionless, but Chime kept looking anxiously at Moon.

Moon had explained something of what he had found out about Ardan and the tower, and where Rift and the two groundlings had come from. They had also established that by everyone's sense of direction the leviathan was moving further west, away from the coast, and the distance was probably already too great for the warriors to make in one flight. *They were lucky*, Moon thought grimly. If the creature had chosen to move while they were still flying towards it, they could have all drowned.

How they would get back to the coast was another question. River swung around and snarled at Moon, "This is your fault." Moon regarded him. All things considered, he had had a hard day.

"If you're not careful, Floret is going to be taking you back to Pearl in a basket."

Floret lifted her hands, protesting, "I didn't say anything!" Jade said, deliberately, "If I have to tell you all to stop fighting one more time, I'm going to beat every single one of you senseless."

There was a short silence. Then Karsis whispered to Flower in Kedaic, “What are they saying?”

“It’s not important,” Flower said, wryly. She sat next to them on the bench, her legs drawn up under her smock. Her face was drawn and weary, but that must have been from being carried on the long flight out here.

“Esom knows where the seed is,” Moon said, speaking Kedaic so the groundlings would understand him.

Everyone turned to Esom and he recoiled a little under the concentrated predatory gazes of a roomful of Raksura. Even though most of them were in groundling form, it was a little intimidating. Even Karsis flinched. Jade said, “Where?”

Esom coughed, and uneasily repeated the story he had told Moon. He finished, “So, I think you should search that building.”

Jade took a step forward to stand over him. “Why are you certain it’s there?”

Esom blinked up at her and appeared to have difficulty answering. Considering how many clothes his people wore, Moon thought it was probably due to the fact that she was dressed only in jewelry. Even with the scales, it had to be distracting. Esom managed, “Ah—”

Karsis put in, “Rift said that’s where Ardan took it.”

Everyone looked at Rift. He twitched uneasily and stared determinedly down at the dirty floor.

Jade watched him for a long moment, her spines flicking. Rift wouldn’t meet her eyes. Finally she turned to the others. “We need to look for this place, see how well-guarded it is.”

River folded his arms. “And make sure it exists at all.”

Moon ignored that. “We’ll need to go on foot. Dawn’s breaking, and the wind is keeping the mist from forming.”

“Not you. This Ardan will be looking for you now.” Jade glanced around at the others. “Vine and Floret? Can you walk through a groundling city without letting anyone know you’re Raksura?”

The two exchanged a worried glance. Vine said, “I think so, yes. Probably.”

Moon looked them over critically. They were dressed like the others, pants and a shirt, a sash and belt at the waist. The fine fabric was sunfaded and a little dirty from their long journey, so they didn’t

look overly prosperous. He said, "Take off anything that looks like Arbora-work, especially your jewelry. And put something on your feet, a cloth or leather wrap, to make it look like you're wearing shoes."

Both looked down at their feet, a little dubious, but neither argued with him.

"Go now," Jade said. "Don't try to fly. Climb down the outside until you're out of the wind. Find the building, but don't try to go inside without us."

Floret nodded soberly, but Vine said, "If we find the seed lying around unguarded, can we—"

"Yes." Jade added, "If you do, I'll be very surprised, since nothing so far has been easy."

"Good point," Floret muttered, and gave Vine a nudge.

As they headed for the stairs, Moon let his breath out in relief. At least they were moving forward again, even if they didn't know exactly where they were going.

Stone had been leaning against the wall, taking it all in with an expression that could best be described as satirical. Now he pushed himself up with one shoulder and said, "Who let you into the tree?"

Both groundlings stared up at him, and Esom's throat worked as he swallowed. There was no space in here for Stone to shift, and he still looked like an older groundling man, battered and gray, wearing battered gray clothes. But he seemed to be taking up far more space in the room, and the air was suddenly heavy. Esom said, "It was him." He pointed toward Rift.

Watching Stone uneasily, Karsis said, "Rift flew to a large doorway high up in the trunk. We couldn't have reached it. Our ship can only lift about forty paces off the ground."

Stone turned to regard Rift, who shrank back against the wall. Stone started across the room toward him, slow deliberate steps.

Moon said, "Leave him alone." The words were out before he thought.

Stone stopped, cocked his head. His expression was opaque. He said, "I need to take care of this now."

Moon looked at Jade, but she watched Rift. None of the others were looking at the warrior; they were waiting, stiff and tense, anticipating violence. Moon flushed cold in realization. *Take care of this* meant *kill the solitary*. Moon growled low in his throat. "No."

Stone was fast in his groundling form, but it took Moon's breath when he was suddenly across the room, face to face with Moon, between one heartbeat and the next.

Moon fought down several impulses, to shift, to fall back, to squint to protect his eyes; he held his ground. Jade gave a startled snarl, a thick, rough sound like rock scraping. The others were dead silent, frozen in place. Rift had flattened himself back against the wall.

Ignoring all of them, Stone said, "This needs to be done. He betrayed us to groundlings."

Moon said, "He didn't know we were coming back to the tree. He didn't know we existed."

"And we don't know what he did to get thrown out of a court. He's a solitary and he can't be trusted."

Moon held his gaze. "Like you couldn't trust me." His voice shook, but it wasn't from fear.

"What?" Stone's eyes went hooded, but not quite in time to conceal his start of shock. He knew Moon meant the day Stone had found him with the Cordans and had taken him up to a ruin in the mountain valley. "No."

Yes. Moon had always known that the only reason Stone had bothered to save him was because he was a consort. But he had been naive enough to think that if Stone had decided that Moon was a real solitary, thrown out of a court for some terrible reason, Stone would have just left him behind somewhere. If he was willing to kill Rift just for showing Ardan the location of an empty colony tree... "You said you wanted to help me. If you hadn't believed what I told you— You took me up there to kill me."

Stone recoiled, snarled, and flung himself out of the room.

Everyone stared. Balm, Chime, and even Drift were appalled, Esom and Karsis confused and frightened. Flower just sighed, tired and disgusted. River looked as if, much against his better judgment, he was reluctantly impressed.

In the silence, Jade stepped forward. She jerked her head toward Rift, and told the warriors, "Watch him." Then she caught Moon's arm and pulled him out of the room.

Chapter Thirteen

Jade hauled Moon across the stairwell to a room on the far side. Root, who still hung from the ceiling, stared curiously as they went past but didn't speak.

The room had a wall of tall windows, sheltered by the terrace on the floor above. Dawn was breaking, the first light spreading gray-blue across the dark sky. There was just enough light to see the carved figures in the walls glaring down with sightless eyes. Wind whipped through the room, scouring away the scent of mold.

Jade dropped Moon's arm and went to the window. She faced away from him, her spines still quivering in agitation.

Moon watched her warily. He couldn't tell who she was most angry at, him, Stone, Rift, or all three of them. He said, "I'm not going to let Stone kill him."

Jade flicked a look at him. "He's a solitary."

Coming from her, that hurt. "So was I." Rift had inadvertently betrayed Indigo Cloud to Ardan, not knowing the colony tree was soon to be occupied. Moon had inadvertently betrayed Indigo Cloud to the Fell, not knowing they had been waiting for turns for vengeance. Moon didn't see much of a difference, except that he was a consort, and the court had needed him.

Jade turned to face him. He couldn't see her expression with her back to the light, but her voice was still taut. "You weren't thrown out of a court, Moon. It's not the same thing."

It felt like the same thing. "If I'd been born a warrior—" "Moon." Jade moved to him and grabbed his shoulders. Moon was braced for just about anything, except what she said. "Stone likes you. He likes you better than most of his natural descendants."

He tried to pull away but she didn't let go. She said, "You didn't give me a chance to tell you I'm glad you're alive. I get here and find out you've talked your way into a groundling wizard's tower, a groundling wizard who collects the decaying bodies of rare creatures —"

"You were supposed to give us three days."

“I couldn’t wait.” She let him go and turned away with a distracted hiss. “Now the warriors are probably trapped out here and this damn thing is still moving. If we go further out than even Stone can fly, we can’t even—” She bit the words off.

Moon rubbed his arms where her hands had pressed into his groundling skin, jolted into remembering that Rift wasn’t the only issue. If they all died here, unable to escape, or drowned trying to reach the forest coast, it would be Jade’s fault for not waiting. That would please River, though probably not much, what with being dead himself. And why had Pearl sent River after them and not one of her other warriors? As far as Moon had been able to tell, she had always kept her favorite warriorlover close at hand. Maybe River had wanted to prove himself. Things had changed in Indigo Cloud, and maybe River couldn’t hold on to his status without showing he was willing to risk his life for the court like Vine and Floret and the other warriors.

He could worry about River’s motives later. Jade was too much of a Raksura to remember there were other ways off this leviathan than flying. Moon said, “The groundlings—Esom and Karsis—have a boat.”

Jade’s spines twitched. “Of course,” she muttered. She turned to him, her brow furrowed. “They’ve said they won’t leave without their friends. We’d have to take it from them.”

Moon shrugged uncomfortably. “I know.” Negal and his crew had helped steal the seed. But telling Esom and Karsis they were on their own was one thing; forcing them to abandon their people to die was another. *Maybe we could work something out.* They didn’t need a boat for the whole trip, just to carry them far enough that the coast was within a safe flying distance for the warriors. “Maybe...” He let the word trail off as he realized the subtle sway of the tower, the sense of motion, was dying away with the howl of the wind.

Jade went to the window. Moon reached her side and looked over the rooftops out to the sea. The rising sun broke through the streaked clouds and glanced off the water, glittering on the roiling whitecaps stirred by the leviathan’s fins. But the waves died down and settled to swells. The leviathan was gliding to a halt.

Jade hissed in bitter amusement. “You and Rift escape Ardan, and suddenly this creature moves further out to sea? It can’t be a coincidence.”

Moon leaned on the windowsill. “It has to be. The whole reason the city needs the magisters at all is because the leviathan moves... at random.” *Huh.* That was what all the groundlings thought, anyway. *Because that’s what the magisters tell them.*

Jade's expression was thoughtfully skeptical. "How convenient for the magisters."

Moon looked out to sea again. "Some groundlings who live here told us that turns ago the magisters started to lose their power, and the leviathan woke and swam away. They can still keep the city together, but they can't make the leviathan go back to the shore."

"Or they let the leviathan swim away, so they could keep control of the city," Jade said.

"Maybe. Maybe they have just enough power to make it move when they want." Ardan clearly had some hold over Magister Lethen, a hold that Lethen bitterly resented. "Or when Ardan wants. Maybe he's the only one with the power to make the leviathan move anymore. He's the youngest magister." He turned away from the window, thinking over what Ardan had said, and not said.

"We know he thought our seed would help him somehow, give him power. We don't know if he was right or not." Jade shook her spines, irritated. "We won't know until we find this mortuary temple."

Moon hesitated, but he wanted this point settled. "Are you going to let Stone kill Rift?"

Jade twitched at the question. But she said, "Not today." Her voice hardened. "That's as far as I'll go."

Moon set his jaw, forced himself not to argue, and walked out.

□

Moon went back into the main room. Rift sat on the floor in the far corner. Esom and Karsis were still seated on the bench, and Chime, Balm, and Drift stood around looking uncomfortable.

Moon asked, "Where's Flower?" River was missing too, but he didn't care if River had gone up to take a turn on watch or had flown away to die somewhere.

He had spoken in Kedaic, and Karsis answered, "She said she was going to talk to the older man who stormed off earlier."

"Is Jade all right?" Balm asked, a little hesitantly.

"Yes." Moon was hesitant too. "She's... resting."

Drift sneered. "She should give you a beating."

Moon took a step toward him. His expression must have made his first impulse clear. Drift flinched back and hissed.

Balm hissed at Drift, and Chime threw him a glare, saying, "Why don't you go say that to Jade and see what happens?"

Apparently declining to follow that advice, Drift subsided. He retreated to lean against the wall with his arms folded, and eyed Moon resentfully.

Esom and Karsis sat stiffly, trying to look as if they weren't tense to the point of rigidity. It seemed cruel to expose them to any more of Drift than absolutely necessary, but they had to be watched. Moon nodded toward an alcove on the other side of the room. It had another stone bench and room to stretch out on the floor. The two groundlings had been awake all night, too, and had to be weary. He said, "You can go over there to rest, if you want. Chime, do you have spare blankets?"

Chime turned to one of the packs lying against the wall. "Yes, I'll find some. And some water, and I think we have some dried fruit and roots they could eat."

Relaxing a little, Karsis said, "Thank you," and Esom nodded, still stiffly.

Moon went over to where Rift was crouched in the corner and sat near him. Rift watched him warily, his body tight with tension. This close, Moon could scent the fear in his sweat. He said, "They won't kill you."

Rift's shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes for a moment. He made a noise that was between a sob and a harsh laugh, and looked up at Moon again. "Your queen does whatever you want?"

Moon stared him down, until Rift dropped his gaze. "Sorry," Rift muttered. "I didn't mean... The consorts at my court weren't like you."

That was probably true. "Did Ardan think I was here alone?" Yesterday Moon had told the magister that he had friends waiting for him, but he was hoping Ardan had taken that as a lie, part of Moon's persona as a trader.

Rift shook his head. "I don't know. He didn't even tell me that he had another guest."

Moon let out his breath. He didn't think that was a lie. Rift's shock at seeing another Raksura had been genuine. "How much does Ardan know about Raksura? When he saw me shift, would he have known I was a consort? That a consort wouldn't be here alone?"

Rift's brow furrowed as he considered it. "He knows what a consort is, but... I'm not sure he really understands, not well enough to realize you wouldn't be traveling alone." Rift hesitated and watched him uneasily. "Why did they send you to the tower? Why not one of

the warriors?"

Moon drew back. "I've been around groundlings. The others haven't." He wasn't ready to say more than that. Rift already had a hold on him, he didn't need to know details. He countered, "What did you do to get thrown out of your court?"

It was Rift's turn to recoil. After a moment, he said, "The queens didn't like me."

The flicker of hesitation in Rift's eyes told Moon it was a lie. And if that was a reason to be exiled, half of Indigo Cloud would be wandering the Three Worlds. "Were you from a royal clutch?"

Startled resentment crossed Rift's expression. "Yes," Rift admitted, biting the word off as if it hurt to tell the truth. "How did you know?"

There was something about Rift's attitude that suggested it. The warriors born out of royal clutches always seemed to be the troublesome ones. "Just a wild guess," Moon said. Across the room he saw Drift, who had been pretending not to listen, roll his eyes in derision.

Rift's sideways look was dubious. Moon said, "Why didn't the queens like you?"

"I had a fight with one of the reigning queen's favorites." That wasn't a good reason to be exiled, either. Moon hadn't even been in the court that long, and he knew young warriors frequently attacked each other. River and Moon had tried to kill each other right in front of Pearl and Jade, and nobody had suggested exiling anybody.

Moon asked, "Did you kill her?"

Rift flicked his spines. "Of course not."

Moon sensed the story had just veered off the truth again. Rift's answer had been too easy. Moon thought an adult female warrior, especially a favorite probably from a royal clutch herself, could have beaten Rift into the ground. And if the fight was so violent that Rift had killed his opponent in self-defense, that wouldn't be such a terrible thing to admit. Moon said, "So they threw you out of the court for losing a fight with a queen's favorite?"

Rift's jaw set as if he suppressed some strong emotion. Moon knew in his bones that this was play-acting. Rift said bitterly, "If that's how you want to describe it. It wasn't fair, but it's what happened."

Moon watched him for a long moment, but Rift's gaze didn't waver. He knew he hadn't gotten the truth yet, but Rift seemed committed to this story, at least for now.

He got to his feet and walked out, randomly picking another doorway off the stairwell. The room within was thankfully empty, a little smaller than the others on this floor, with long narrow windows letting in light and the damp air.

There was a quiet step behind him and he glanced back to see Balm.

She stopped and said, "He's not like you, Moon. He's a real solitary, exiled from his court for a good reason."

Moon rubbed his eyes, trying to be patient. He suspected he was going to be having this conversation a lot. "You don't know he's not like me," he said, aware he was just being difficult. "I could be lying."

Balm shook her head in exasperation. "You don't know anything about living in a court. You have to have everything explained to you, and when we do explain it, you look like you think we're crazy. Everyone who speaks to you notices that. No one is that good a liar."

Moon turned away abruptly and sat down against the wall, folding his arms. He had expected to have the conversation, but not that it was going to be about him. Balm followed and sat on her heels in front of him. He said, reluctantly, "It could have been me. Everything Rift did. When I was alone, I was just looking for a place to live. If I'd been hurt, trapped, and been found by someone like Ardan, who was kind to me... Even if he wanted to use me, I might have gone along with it, just to belong somewhere." He waved a hand in frustration. "That's exactly what happened with Stone. I crossed the Three Worlds for the first person who asked me."

"The first Raksura who asked you," Balm corrected, unconvinced. "Back at the colony tree, you told me what I should do. Now I'm telling you. This solitary is not like you. Thinking of him that way is a mistake." She sat back. "He's even changed his name. No one calls a child 'Rift.'"

Stone had said much the same thing about Sorrow, the warrior whom Moon had thought of as his mother. But a warrior who changed her name to Sorrow because her court had been destroyed and she was left alone with four small Arbora and a fledgling consort to care for was understandable. A warrior who left his court and called himself "Rift"... "I know. I know I can't trust him."

Balm watched him. "Do you trust us?"

Moon couldn't answer. Maybe he didn't trust them. Maybe he was pretending they were his family, going through the motions, but deep in his heart he didn't really believe it. *It would explain a lot*, he told

himself. *Like why you keep acting like an idiot.*

Balm shook her head regretfully. “Sometimes it doesn’t seem like it. Did you think we would have let that noisy little Emerald Twilight queen touch you?”

It had never even crossed his mind that they might defend him. From a Fell or a predator or some other common enemy, but not from a Raksuran queen, even one from a strange court. It was an uncomfortable insight.

His inability to answer told Balm all she needed to know. She sighed and squeezed his knee sympathetically, then pushed to her feet and walked away.

Chime passed her in the doorway, and Moon hunched his shoulders, feeling beleaguered. “Don’t say she’s right. I know she’s right.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.” Chime sat down, settling uneasily on the cracked tiles. “She is right, though.”

Moon rubbed his forehead; the tension and the long night underground had given him a headache. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing. I just... I don’t want to worry Flower. Especially now, when she’s trying to talk to Stone.”

Moon squelched a surge of guilt at the mention of Stone. “Worry her about what?”

Chime sighed. “I keep having these... odd feelings.”

“Odd how?”

Chime made a vague gesture. “Like I can feel water moving, and... cold and weight and rock. I’m twitchy, like I can just catch glimpses of things that flick away before I can focus on them. The feelings come and go, in bursts—which is good, because otherwise I’d go out of my head.”

That definitely sounded odd. “When did it start?”

“Since just before dawn, when we landed on this creature.” Chime shrugged, obviously uncomfortable with the whole idea that he might have some sort of heightened awareness of the leviathan. “I know. If it’s a coincidence, it’s a strange one.”

“Is it a mentor thing? I mean, are you...” Knowing how badly Chime felt about his involuntary change to warrior, Moon hesitated to suggest that Chime might be getting his abilities back. If he wasn’t, if

it was just his imagination... Hope was painful.

But Chime shook his head. "No, it can't be. Augury isn't like this. This is different."

"Then you should talk to Flower."

"I know." Chime slumped. "I'm tired of strange things happening to me. I just got used to being able to fly, and to hunting, and all the other things I'm supposed to do now. I know this is the only way you've ever seen me, but to me it still feels like it just happened."

"No, I know what you mean." Moon felt like he was reliving his past at regular intervals, whether he liked it or not.

Flower stepped into the doorway, gave the room a sour look, then came to sit down next to Moon with a grunt of effort. "Consorts," she said, in a tone that made it sound like an insulting epithet. "Old, stubborn, obstinate consorts." She eyed Moon without favor. "And you. You have to be coaxed to do everything except risk your life."

Moon fumbled for a rebuttal as Chime said, "Are you all right? You look terrible."

Flower transferred her glare to him. "If you ask me that one more time, I will curdle your liver."

"Hah, good luck trying to slip me the simple to do it with." Chime leaned close to her, despite her attempt to bat him away. "You've got blood trails in your eyes."

Moon took her hand. Her skin was the matte white of extreme age, no trace left of its original color, though there were traces of gray in the creases around her wrist and on her palm. He wondered how many Raksura were left in the court who remembered what Flower had looked like in her youth, if her skin had been bronze or copper or some shade in between, if her hair had been black or red-brown. Stone was more than old enough, and maybe Bone. Pearl might be, but he wasn't sure. He hadn't learned to judge the age of queens yet. He said, "You should rest."

She freed her hand. "I'll rest when we get the seed."

"Yes, that's why I'm risking my life," Moon said pointedly. "We knew what we were doing. You shouldn't have let Jade bring the warriors."

"I know." Flower rubbed her eyes. "I advised her not to go."

That didn't make Moon feel any better. Worried, Chime said, "I didn't know. Did you have a vision that we shouldn't go? And Jade didn't listen?"

“No, it wasn’t a vision,” she said, annoyed. “I just thought we should wait. Sometimes I don’t have visions; sometimes I have common sense. Not that any of you listen to me.”

“You could have lied and said it was a vision,” Moon said. They both looked at him, nearly identical exasperated expressions. “What?”

“Mentors don’t lie about visions.” Flower sighed. “I’m going to rest now, hold still.”

“What? No, I can’t—” Flower climbed into Moon’s lap, ignoring his protests. “I need to keep an eye on Rift.”

“Balm and the others are watching him and the groundlings. Root is going to come get me when it’s my turn,” Chime said and settled against Moon’s shoulder.

Flower had buried her face against his chest and he automatically put his arms around her. She felt like she was all sharp bones under the light material of her dress; it was like holding a Kek. He didn’t remember her feeling this insubstantial. In fact he was fairly certain she had had more solid muscle, like the other Arbora, not that long ago. But before he could think of a way to frame a question, she said, “Stone won’t kill him. Not now. You two can fight that out later.”

Moon leaned back against the wall. He was painfully sensitive to any mention of Stone at the moment, angry, guilty, and angry at himself for feeling guilty.

He didn’t mean to rest, but he hadn’t slept since last night, so he ended up dozing for a while. He woke when Root came to get Chime for his turn at watch. Too anxious to stay still, Moon handed the still-sleeping Flower over to Root.

Everything was quiet. Chime and Song settled down to watch Rift, who had fallen asleep. Jade was in the other room, sleeping with Balm, and River was up in the top room on watch. Esom and Karsis had even dozed off, lying in a corner of the main room on borrowed blankets.

Moon paced an empty room on the far side of the stairwell, thinking of everything they needed to do. Jade and the warriors had eaten heavily before they left the mainland, and had brought meat in their packs, wrapped in the big leaves of the mountain-saplings. It was enough for the moment, but they were going to have to feed everyone in the next couple of days. They still had enough metal bits to buy food, but the market he and Stone had used was too close to Ardan’s tower. Looking for another one would be a good use of Moon’s time, except he couldn’t go outside in the daylight for fear that Ardan’s men

might be searching for him.

He had reached a peak of frustration when Song ducked into the doorway. She said, “Floret’s back. She says they found the place.”

□

“It was just like the groundling said,” Floret reported, when they gathered in the main room again.

Stone had returned from the depths of the tower and leaned against the wall, as calm as if nothing had happened. That made Moon’s jaw so tight his back teeth ached. Rift hunched in a corner, with Chime and Balm nearby. River stood near Jade, with a grimly skeptical expression that seemed to be trying to indicate that he was a leader but not responsible for anything that went wrong. Esom and Karsis had taken seats on the bench again, and watched anxiously. Flower sat nearby, still trying to wake up. Drift was on guard now, up on the open top floor, and Root and Song stayed near the doorway, as if ready to make a quick escape if there was another fight.

Having left before the argument broke out, Floret didn’t notice the undercurrents, or if she did, she was too excited by her news to worry about it. “A big round building, near a flooded part of the city, towards the front of the leviathan. There weren’t many groundlings living nearby, and they all seemed to be sick or sleeping, and they smelled funny.” *Or drunk*, Moon thought. Floret had probably never seen anyone intoxicated before. She continued, “The only ones who looked normal were guarding the round building’s doors. Vine stayed behind to keep watch on it, in case anyone comes to take the seed away.”

Jade asked, “There was only one way in?”

“That we could see.” Floret glanced at Moon. “Vine and I thought that since you and the two groundlings found an underground passage out of that tower—”

“There could be one into this mortuary.” Moon looked at Rift. “Is there?”

Rift shrugged helplessly. “There could be, but I never went there with Ardan. I don’t know where the entrance would be.”

“If it’s guarded on the surface, wouldn’t it be guarded underground, too?” Chime ventured, with a cautious glance at Stone.

“The passage down from Ardan’s tower wasn’t, but then groundlings would have needed ropes or ladders to use it,” Moon said. It had looked more like a handy disposal area for garbage or waste.

Whatever its original purpose, it had fallen into such disuse it had been nearly forgotten. He didn't remember seeing any other shafts upward to other structures, not that he had been looking closely. "We could try going back and working our way toward the mortuary, but Ardan might still be searching down there for us."

Stone said, in Kedaic, "Why did you think it was a mortuary?"

Moon looked up, startled. Stone watched Esom and Karsis. Confused, since no one had translated the other part of the conversation for them, Esom said, "The building I described, where we think your seed is? Oh, well, Negal and I saw what seemed to be a funeral procession going inside. We asked one of the local men, and he told us the dead were carried there." He looked around, and explained, "We had been trying to find out about the burial customs of the city."

"Why?" Balm asked, her expression critical. She seemed to find this a dubious pursuit at best.

Karsis explained, "Negal believes that it tells a great deal about a people, how they dispose of their dead."

"So they've been storing all the remains of everyone who died on this leviathan for however many turns?" River said, skeptical. Then he added, "Maybe that's what the underground area is for and there is a passage up into the place from there."

Moon was too struck by River actually saying something helpful to reply immediately. Jade turned to Rift. "Is that what they do with their dead?"

"I don't know." Rift twitched uncomfortably. But after a moment of reluctant thought, he added, "I never saw anything down there that looked like a place for burials, but I didn't explore very far. Once I found a way to the surface, I didn't want to risk Ardan finding out where I'd gone."

Jade nodded, her decision made. "We won't go back through the underground, not unless there's no other choice. Moon's right. Ardan might still be looking for you down there. We'll search around this temple." She glanced toward the stairwell, the fall of gray light still illuminating it, and amended, "Some of us will search around it. Unobtrusively, as groundlings. I'll join you when it gets dark."

"I'll go," River said.

Of course you will, Moon thought. He was trapped here until dark.

Stone pushed away from the wall. Moon tensed all over, but Stone only said, "I'm going out to talk to some groundlings, see what

they know about this mortuary place.”

It wasn't a bad idea. In fact, it was such a good idea, Moon wished he had thought of it. There was Theri, Rith, and Enad to ask, if they were back from their daily work, or the woman who ran the wine bar. But it was a much touchier subject than how strangers found work in the city. Moon asked, “How are you going to work ‘What do you do with your dead?’ casually into a conversation?” Tension made the words come out sharper than he meant.

Everyone seemed to tense in apprehension. But Stone just said, “I thought I'd ask somebody who won't notice. Like Dari.”

□

As soon as the sun sank out of the cloudy sky, Moon and Jade left the tower, flying toward the coastline near the leviathan's head.

All through the afternoon, the warriors had taken turns surreptitiously searching the empty buildings in this area, looking for passages down to the underground space. Root, Song, and Floret had been left back at their tower to keep watch over Rift and the two groundlings.

The mortuary temple lay in a shallow valley between the leviathan's shoulders, surrounded by crowded, crumbling stone structures only a few stories high. There weren't many vapor-lights and the empty streets were deeply shadowed, except for the gleam of water. The sea must wash up over the leviathan's head whenever it moved, flooding the streets and leaving puddles behind. Moon could pick out only a few lit windows here and there. This was obviously not a highly prized neighborhood, if it had ever been one.

To the northwest, he could see where the creature's body dipped down, just below the ridge formed by its right arm. The roofs and top stories of flooded buildings were just visible above the dark water.

They banked in to land on the peak of a roof, and Jade climbed down to the alley. Moon paused to watch a groundling lamp-tender make his way across the open plaza in front of the temple's entrance. It was a big, round structure, at least four stories tall, topped by an octagonal dome. A wall formed a roofless court before the entrance, and inside it several blue-pearl guards, probably Ardan's men, stood in front of the metalbound double doors. The night was cool, and they had gathered around a waist-high brazier. From their postures, they were very bored.

The lamp-tender reached the stand at the far end of the plaza. He filled the well in its base from the heavy canister he carried, closed it,

and went on his way. The sputtering vapor-light in its glass cage at the top of the stand brightened noticeably.

“Moon,” Jade whispered from below.

Moon climbed down the pitched roof to a ledge where Chime and Balm waited. Chime reported quietly, “Stone just got here. He said he thinks there’s something over in that part that’s underwater.”

“We hadn’t looked there yet,” Balm said, frustrated. “We thought if there was an open passage, the water would have drained away.”

They took flight again, Chime following them toward the flooded section. Balm went to gather the others back from their fruitless search.

They circled down to the flooded street, and Moon landed on a roof and crept to the edge. The street formed a dark passage below, lined with empty stone houses, their doors long ago washed away. Stone was in groundling form, standing balanced on top of a low wall just below this house. The water was as dark as obsidian and gleamed in the moonlight. The place smelled of dead fish and silt and... “Do you smell that?” Moon whispered.

Jade answered, “Yes, it’s water traveler. There must have been one through here at some point.”

Moon hooked his claws into chinks in the mortar and climbed down the wall. “I saw some yesterday, heading toward the city. But why is the scent here, and not at the harbor?”

Following Moon and Jade, Chime said, “This must be where they do their trading, to keep them away from the groundlings in the harbor. After all, Nobent wanted to eat you when he thought you were a groundling.”

Then from below Stone said, “The rumor I heard from Dari is that the city trades the dead bodies of the poor to the water travelers in exchange for edilverine.”

“They trade their dead?” Moon stepped cautiously into the water and his claws slipped on the slimy pavement.

“For vines?” Jade added skeptically, hanging from the wall as she waited for Chime to climb down.

“That’s the part I haven’t figured out yet,” Stone admitted, and turned to lead the way along the flooded street.

Behind them, Chime muttered, “The more I hear about this place, the less I like it.”

If this was true, the vines had to be something the city wanted or needed, badly. “Maybe they make a drug out of it. Like that smoke, and whatever it is that Dari drinks.”

Stone made a noncommittal noise and turned a corner to follow the street as it passed under a high, curved archway. It led into what had been an open court with a covered terrace at the back, supported by pillars carved in the shape of giant lily stalks. Like the street, it was flooded, the water washing the broad steps up to the deeply shadowed terrace. “How did you find this place?” Chime asked.

Stone said, “Once Dari mentioned water travelers, I just followed the scent.”

Moon tasted the air as he and Jade followed Stone up the steps and past the columns. The scent of water traveler was much heavier here, clinging to the damp mortar and the furry plants growing across the vaulted ceiling. Stone dug in the pouch at his belt and pulled out a faintly glowing object—one of Flower’s spelled rocks.

It cast a dim light over the cracked, stained paving and up to the far wall, revealing a carved scene with life-size groundlings in a procession, carrying a body on a bier. The carving framed a doorway, rusted metal figured with elaborate curving designs. “It’s locked, maybe barred on the inside.” Stone tugged on the handle, demonstrating.

“Let me see. If you shift under here, you’ll break the roof.” Jade stepped forward and took the handle.

“Don’t break it off,” Moon said.

“Moon—” Jade jerked at the door and it yielded with a loud crack. Pieces of a broken lock fell to the ground as the door swung open. Stone lifted his light and it shone down a long ramp that led into darkness.

Stone started to step forward and Chime snapped, “Stop!”

They all froze. Moon flicked a quick glance around the doorway, but he didn’t see anything but dark patches of mold. He whispered, “What?”

“I— It’s— I’ve got a funny feeling,” Chime said, sounding mortally embarrassed. “Like there’s something there.”

“A mentor feeling?” Jade asked, and crouched down for a closer look at the pavement just inside the door. Careful not to let any of his frills fall past the threshold, Moon joined her.

“Maybe,” Chime admitted.

"I thought all that didn't come back after you changed," Stone said, his tone carefully neutral.

"Well, it hadn't." Chime twitched uneasily. "Until... Look, I'm probably wrong."

Jade nudged Moon and nodded toward something on the pavement inside the doorway. "No, you're right," Moon told Chime. About a pace past the threshold was a line of dirt and flotsam that had washed up under the door. It had formed a straight line across the ramp, as if it had encountered some solid object, except there was nothing there. "It's one of Ardan's barriers, like the one around the tower."

Jade sat up, her spines flicking impatiently. "This could be a trap. If they trade with the water travelers, groundlings must come and go through here, and the lock would be enough to keep thieves out. The only reason to put a magical barrier here is to catch us."

"Trap or not, we still have to get in there," Stone said.

"Esom said he could get past the tower barrier without Ardan knowing," Moon said. "If he wasn't lying."

"We'll find out." Jade turned to Chime. "Bring him here."

□

"It's an untested theory," Esom said, though at least he kept his voice low as he sloshed through the water up the terrace steps.

"Then we'll test it," Chime told him as he climbed down a column from the roof.

Balm and River waited here now too. Drift was on watch, posted on a rooftop above the flooded street, and Vine on the roof of the terrace.

"Finally," Jade muttered, and pushed to her feet. It hadn't really been that long. Moon and Stone had spent the time exploring the terrace, carefully not speaking to each other. Moon had found wilting scraps of a plant that smelled like the vegetation that had grown all over the Kek town on the coast, more evidence for the idea that the water travelers traded here.

River hadn't been in favor of the plan. "You're trusting a groundling thief," he had said. "That's almost as bad as trusting the solitary."

Jade just ignored his objections, and Moon didn't have an argument either. The only basis they had for trusting Esom was that

he would be a fool to betray them to Ardan.

Then Floret climbed down the wall, followed by Flower. Jade hissed, startled and angry. "What are you doing here? Who's watching the solitary?"

"Root and Song and the groundling woman," Floret said, her flattened spines conveying guilt and chagrin.

"The groundling woman?" Jade repeated incredulously. "Are you —"

"I made her bring me," Flower interrupted, sounding brisk. She shifted to groundling and shook out her dress. "It smells foul here. Where's this barrier you're all babbling about?"

Silence fell. Moon scratched under the frills behind his ear and kept his mouth shut. After a moment, Jade said through gritted teeth, "Floret, get back to the tower."

Floret fled.

Jade made an effort to drop her ruffled spines. She said, "You should be resting. You've been ill since we reached the coast, whether you'll admit it or not."

"I can rest later." Flower crossed the terrace to the threshold of the doorway, and Stone shone the light on it for her. She nodded and glanced at Chime thoughtfully. "Something's there, all right. It smells of groundling magic."

Chime shrugged uneasily. "I don't know. Maybe it was just a good guess."

Stone snorted, but didn't otherwise comment.

Esom edged forward and frowned at the barrier. Moon switched to Kedaic, asking him, "Can you see it?"

"No, but I can feel it." He held out a hand, carefully not reaching past the doorway. "It's similar to the barrier around Ardan's tower."

"Can you get us past it?" Jade said, her voice tight with impatience.

"I can try." Esom looked around at them all, his expression grim. "I was never able to get outside Ardan's tower to try with that barrier. Tampering with this one could alert Ardan."

River hissed angrily, as if they hadn't all thought of that earlier. "If it does—"

"If it does," Moon cut him off, and finished to Esom, "Then you'll know, for when you go back to his tower to get your friends."

Esom glanced nervously at River, but said, "That's a good point." He stepped forward, hands out, and eased across the threshold, right up to the line of debris that marked the barrier. He crouched down and slid his hands along the pavement.

Moon stepped to the side to see his face. Esom's eyes were shut in concentration, and sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cool air. Flower cocked her head, as if listening to something the rest of them couldn't hear. Chime watched intently, obviously straining his senses to feel what Esom and Flower felt.

Esom turned his head, and said in a hoarse whisper, "Be ready. I won't be able to keep it open very long."

Jade turned to the others. "Vine and Drift will stay here on watch. The rest of you will come with us."

Vine, hanging upside down from the edge of the terrace roof, said worriedly, "Be careful."

Moon happened to look at Balm in time to see an expression of relief cross her face. She had been afraid Jade would leave her behind.

Then Esom slowly eased to his feet and held his arms out as if lifting an invisible curtain. As Esom stood, Moon felt a breath of cooler air, tinged with decay and incense and mold. It was a draft that had been held back by the barrier, now flowing from the doorway. It was more confirmation that Esom was performing as promised.

Esom stepped in, pushed the barrier above his head. He gasped, "Now!"

Moon lunged forward, halted at the threshold as Jade beat him there and slipped past Esom. He followed her, Chime and Flower behind him. River and Balm ducked past Esom, then Stone. Esom stumbled suddenly, staggered forward as if something heavy had fallen on him. Breathing hard, he moved further down the ramp, away from the barrier. "I think... I think it's all right. Hopefully Ardan didn't sense that."

Jade said, "You didn't have to come in here. You could have waited outside with Vine."

Esom leaned against the wall, still catching his breath. He made a helpless gesture. "I meant to, but it got a little much for me. It was easier to go forward than back."

"You can say that about a lot of things," Flower said in an aside to Chime.

"Then you'd better come with us," Jade told Esom. She took the

lightrock away from Stone and started down the ramp.

Moon had somehow assumed Stone was staying behind. Unable to stop himself from sounding accusing, he said, "Why did you come? This place is too small for you to shift."

Even in the dark, he could tell Stone was giving him that look. "That's none of your business."

"It's my business if you collapse the ceiling on us."

"Both of you, quiet," Jade snapped.

Chapter Fourteen

The ramp curved down into darkness, the stale air heavy with the scent of old and new decay. The light caught carvings rimed with mold: processions carrying biers, faces twisted in pain and grief.

In the dark it was it hard to tell, but they all looked like the blue-pearl groundlings. *Maybe they lived here first*, Moon thought, *and the others all came later*. Maybe it was their crazy idea to tame a leviathan. He suspected many of their descendants had cause to regret it.

They were some distance below street level when their light fell on an opening in the wall that looked as if it had been roughly chiseled out. It stank of edilvine that was gradually fermenting into something else, and as Jade stepped inside they saw bundles of the vine, stuffed into vats filled with dark liquid. Esom made a gagging noise, clapped a hand over his mouth and nose, and retreated back to the corridor.

“That’s the drug,” Stone said, and stepped past him. “It smells like that wine bar.”

The stink of it was intense, but it wasn’t having any ill effect on Moon or the other Raksura.

“That’s not what we want.” Jade turned away, hissing in frustration.

Moon glanced at Chime just in time to see him flinch, as if something had suddenly poked him. “Are you all right?” Moon asked, as they followed Jade down the ramp.

“Yes.” Chime kept his voice low. “It’s that... thing I told you about. It’s worse here.”

Chime meant he was sensing the leviathan again. Unlike Chime’s flash of insight about the barrier over the door, Moon didn’t see how an awareness of the leviathan could help them. It wasn’t like they didn’t know the creature was here. Though maybe Chime would be able to give them warning if it was about to move again.

“What thing?” Flower demanded from behind them.

“You didn’t tell her?” Moon said, his attention on the corridor

ahead. It still sloped down, curving back toward where the mortuary temple lay on the surface.

Chime protested, "I didn't have a chance—"

Then Jade said, "Quiet, there's light ahead." She handed the light-rock back to Stone, who tucked it away in his pack. After a moment, Moon's eyes adjusted, and he saw the dim white glow somewhere down the corridor.

Following it, they found the passage ended in a wide doorway that led to a much bigger space, scented of earth and cold water and more decay.

They stepped through and made their way down a crumbling set of steps into a cavernous chamber, the ceiling curving up out of sight. It was lit by fading mist-lights, their vapor heavy in the air. The lamps stood on metal stands only ten paces high and secured to the floor with clamps, leaving most of the chamber in heavy darkness. Dozens of thick, square pillars supported the ceiling, and every surface Moon could see, the walls, the pillars, was covered with plaques carved with unintelligible writing. It felt like a deep underground cavern, but they hadn't come down nearly far enough for this space to be completely below the surface. "We're under that dome," Moon said softly.

Her tail lashing, Jade turned to Balm, River, and Chime. "Scout this place."

River flicked his spines in annoyance, but he leapt to the nearest pillar, and scrambled up to jump to the next. Esom ducked nervously as River passed over his head. Balm and Chime bounded away in different directions. Moon tasted the air, but the stench of decay and the competing odor of the fermenting edivine overlaid any more subtle scents.

Jade looked around again, thoughtful. "This carving—is it writing?"

"It's in the city's native language. I think it's names, the names of the dead." Esom stepped closer to the nearest column and squinted to see in the dim light. "The plaques must cover their burial vaults."

Moon wondered why the inhabitants of this place had chosen that method. He had seen groundling cities that stacked their dead in aboveground mortuary vaults, and it never seemed like a good idea to him. For a city on the back of a leviathan, it was worse. But it might be a holdover from their homeland of Emriat-terrene, an attempt to show their dominance over the leviathan by keeping the same customs they had practiced on solid ground.

Flower frowned. "So this is where the dead are supposed to be put, and instead they sell them to water travelers?"

"That's the rumor," Stone said, suspiciously studying the shadows overhead. "From the death-stink in that passage, I'd say the rumor's true."

Moon said, "They can't be selling all their dead." Surely the water travelers had to have some other food source besides dead groundlings from this city. "Maybe just the ones who can't pay for a place here." Or maybe there was no room left, all the space taken up with the ancient bones of turns and turns of dead.

Flower lifted a brow, dubious. "You have to pay for a place to be dead in?"

Moon shrugged. "Sometimes, in cities. It's a groundling thing."

Balm bounded back to Jade's side and reported, "There's a stairway and a passage, but it goes up, toward the doorway in the plaza that the groundlings were guarding."

"There has to be a trap at that entrance," Moon said. Ardan would be expecting them to come in that way, and had placed the barrier at the water traveler dock to keep them from using it as an escape route.

Scrabbling sounded overhead, and River's voice called out, "There's something here!"

They crossed the dark space, following River's progress back over the ceiling, Esom sprinting to keep up.

They were headed toward the center of the huge chamber, toward an open space ringed by more pillars. In the very center, standing on the paving, was a tall, domed structure made of stained, coppery metal. It stood forty paces high, and was at least that wide. Wrapped around the verdigrised metal was a figured sculpture of a sea serpent, coiled over the curve of the roof. Its triangular head hung over the top and glared sightlessly down at them.

"This is what you want," Esom said, breathing hard as he caught up to them. "This looks like part of another structure, much older than the mortuary."

As the others spread out to examine the structure, Moon stepped close to look at the surface. The metal showed pitting and discoloration that might be from harsh weather, as if it had been exposed to the elements for turns before the mortuary temple had been built atop it. He felt air move across the scales on his feet and looked down at the base of the dome. There was a gap there, too regular to be a crack, and it seemed to stretch all along the foot of the

metal shell. “He’s right—it’s not sitting on the floor. The floor’s built around it.”

Jade had circled the dome and returned to stand next to Moon. “We’re close; we have to be,” she muttered. “Does anybody see a door?”

Chime arrived a moment later and dropped lightly down from the ceiling. “I found a small passage going off toward the east, but there were no lights, so I couldn’t tell—” He stared at the dome, then threw an uncertain glance at Jade. “We think the seed is in there?”

“We think something’s in there,” Flower said in frustration, and flattened her hands against the discolored metal.

Then Balm leaned close to one of the metal coils of the serpent. “Wait, I think there’s a seam under here. Someone come and—”

“Quiet.” Flower turned suddenly and stared intently into the shadows past the pillars. The tension in her body made Moon turn to follow her gaze, but the shadows were empty. The air was undisturbed, not even by a drift of dust motes in the mist-light. The stillness made an uneasy prickle creep up under his spines. Then Flower said, “Something’s coming.”

The others stirred uneasily. Stone shifted, the sudden blur of dark mist making Esom flinch and stifle a yelp. Looming over them, Stone took in a breath with a hiss.

River shook his head, but watched the darkness warily. “There’s nothing here. We searched.”

Flower didn’t even glance at him. Her voice had a grim edge. “It’s coming through the air.”

“The wardens,” Moon said. They had known this place might be under their protection. “Ardan’s guard creatures.” But even as he said it, he felt a shiver across his scales as the air turned cold and dry, as if something was drawing the damp out of the stone surfaces. That hadn’t happened when the wardens had appeared in Ardan’s tower.

Impatient, Jade told Flower, “You look for a way to get into this damn thing while we kill these creatures.”

Moon said, “Getting out of the temple is going to be the problem.” The air grew tight, making it a little difficult to breathe. *Ardan could have put a hundred of the things down here.* “We don’t know how many—”

“Getting out is not the problem,” Flower said flatly. She shifted to her Arbora form, her scales white as bone, catching no gleam from the

light. “*That’s the problem.*”

It formed out of the darkness just past the pillars, a shape so large its head brushed the lowest point of the ceiling’s arch. Moon’s spines flared and he snarled in astonishment as the diaphanous shape solidified into blue scales and massive clawed hands. He saw the fish-like tail with giant fins, stretched away between the pillars. It was the giant waterling that hung in Ardan’s tower. From the sickening scent that wafted from it, it was still dead.

It went from insubstantial to solid faster than Moon could shout a warning. It lunged forward with a muffled roar, its unhinged jaw gaped. Stone flared his wings, leaping at its face.

The waterling roared, flung up an arm to push Stone away, but the distraction gave them all a chance to move. Jade snatched Flower out of the creature’s path and fell back as the others scattered. Moon darted forward and dodged the giant hand that slammed down a pace from his tail. That too-close look told him it was only too true. The creature was still dead. Its scales were discolored. The flesh around its gnarled claws gray with putrefaction. He jumped over its hand, raked it with his feet claws in passing. It snarled, turned toward him and away from Chime, who had just grabbed Esom and bounded away. Stone hit the waterling’s face again, and as it batted him away Moon ducked under its arm, bolted across the floor, and leapt up to the pillar where the others had taken cover.

They all clung to the far side, with Jade, Balm, and River peering around the corner at the waterling. Flower had pulled away from Jade and hooked her claws into the carving to support herself. Chime crouched above her, clutching a terrified Esom. Stone had retreated to the opposite side of the chamber. Hanging from a pillar, he lashed his tail and growled to keep the waterling’s attention.

Moon climbed around River, who hissed, “What is that thing?”

“We can kill it.” Balm clung to the pillar next to Jade, watching the creature with predatory speculation. “It’s not as bad as a major kethel.”

“But it’s already dead,” Moon told them. “It was hanging in Ardan’s tower, stuffed.”

“He’s right,” Esom seconded miserably from above them. “It’s been reanimated, somehow, or this is a spirit-construction. I really have no idea how Ardan did this.”

Jade and Balm stared at Moon and he said, “Me neither.”

Flower said, grimly, “There’s nothing I can do.”

“Then how do we get past it?” Chime asked, frantic. “The serpentdome—”

“We’ll take care of this thing. You, Flower, and the groundling get the dome open,” Jade snarled.

“How?” River demanded.

“Go for its face, distract it so Stone can attack.” She tensed to spring off the pillar. “Now!”

Jade, Balm, and River took the direct route and sprang from pillar to pillar. Moon swarmed up to the ceiling, then jumped rapidly from carving to carving to drop down on the waterling’s head just as the others hit it in the face and shoulders. It roared and flailed at them, then Stone hit it from behind, slamming into its back to dig his claws into its scales.

Its tail flipped up, slapped Stone, and sent him tumbling across the chamber. Moon caught a glancing blow from its hand and it flung him away to bounce off a pillar. He hit the floor and rolled to his feet, his head ringing. River was on the floor, struggling to stand, and Balm clung to a pillar, shaking out her wings. Jade had managed to hold on to the waterling and still tore determinedly at the creature’s neck. *Oh, this is going to be a tough one*, Moon thought grimly. He saw Chime, Flower, and Esom had managed to get back over to the little dome, that they were crouched down to examine the gap in the floor. Moon took a deep breath and dove for the waterling again.

He struck at its face, twisted away to avoid its teeth as it snapped at him. The thing didn’t react to pain like a living creature, and it didn’t bleed, and that was going to be a problem. River struck at its lower body and opened a gash across its stomach, and the creature barely noticed.

As Moon bounced back to a pillar and braced himself for another strike, Jade got in a rip across its throat, just above the decaying gills. That should have opened an artery, but it only released a short burst of foul-smelling fluid. It clawed at the wound and reached for Jade, forcing her to scramble back over its shoulder.

Moon saw that Balm clung to the ceiling carving just above, caught her eye, and pointed emphatically toward the creature’s head. Balm nodded, and Moon pushed off the pillar as she dropped from the ceiling. As Balm landed on the waterling’s head, Moon darted at its face, distracting it. Then Balm stretched down and raked it across the right eye.

The waterling roared, flailed its arms, and Moon twisted away

only to run smack into a giant blue palm.

It slapped him out of the air. Instinct made him snap his wings in to protect them. Moon hit the paving in an uncontrolled tumble, and bounced to a halt to land on his back. The breath knocked out of him, he looked up to see the waterling's big ugly face looming over him, one eye ripped open and leaking puss, the other filled with fury.

Then the waterling jerked back, roaring.

Moon shoved himself back and scrambled away, far enough to see Stone clamped to the creature's back, his teeth and claws sunk deep into its flesh just above its spine. Then Stone twisted his head.

There was a muffled crack and the waterling stiffened, its tail lifted and fell with a thump that Moon felt through the paving. Then it slumped sideways, its body going limp.

Stone released it, spat in disgust, and jumped down off the creature's back. The waterling was still alive, or at least animate. Its one working eye was still aware and furious, and its fingers twitched, though it couldn't seem to move its arms. Moon took a deep breath in relief. He didn't think they could have kept that up much longer. Jade and River glided down from the pillars to land at a safe distance, staring uneasily at the fallen creature.

Then from the dome, Chime shouted, "We've found a way in!"

Moon staggered upright. Chime had somehow managed to lift up the heavy figured metal of the sea serpent's coil, next to the seam Balm had found earlier. Flower leaned down and pried at something hidden under the coil, while Esom tried to peer over her shoulder without getting poked by her spines.

Moon reached them just as Jade arrived, River limping after her. Chime said breathlessly, "This metal piece is on a hinge, see? And there's a—"

"A place for a key." Flower had found a slot in the smooth metal under the coil. The slot was meant for something round, with oddly-shaped projections; it did look like a keyhole.

Esom said, "But we don't have the key. There might be some way to pick it."

Flower stepped back to look at the foot of the dome where it fit against the floor. She straightened up and tapped the edge of the seam. "Stone, push on this. I think this is a separate piece that slides sideways."

Stone leaned in, retracted his claws to plant his hands on the

metal, and pushed. With a creak and a squeal of distressed metal, the whole section of the dome started to slide, slowly revealing a split at the seam that leaked dim white light.

They moved hastily back, and Jade pulled Flower away.

As the dome opened, they saw an empty room only half the size of the structure, lit by two hanging vapor-lights. The walls were covered with the now-familiar carvings of blue-pearl groundlings, discolored with age. In the center stood a broad waist-high plinth, the slanting surface set with polished crystals in various blues, greens, golds.

Flower stepped inside and moved toward the plinth. Esom hung back, telling her, “Careful. It could be dangerous.”

Moon leaned inside the doorway for a better look at the plinth. Metal plates set beside the crystals were covered with incised writing and figures. *We didn’t know it, but this was what we were looking for.* He said, “You know what that looks like?”

Chime nodded, almost bouncing with excitement. “The steering device of a flying boat.”

Stone braced himself and gripped the sliding panel more tightly. Apparently the mechanism wouldn’t allow it to stay open on its own. Jade stepped over the threshold, and said, “Steering? You mean this is where they control the leviathan?”

Flower frowned at the plinth and shifted back to her groundling form as if she could see it better that way. “But there’s no way to turn it, no way to steer.”

Watching anxiously, Esom said, “It has to be some kind of control mechanism. We know the Magisters controlled the leviathan when the city was first built, but they lost the ability.” He edged forward, trying to see better but still clearly wary about approaching the device. “Maybe they lost the knowledge to make this work.”

At the moment, Moon didn’t care. He stepped inside, moved close to the plinth, and tried to make some sense of the objects set into its surface. Only one was even vaguely familiar, a round brass plate protected by a glass cover. Inside was a sliver of metal on a pin, pointing south, that quivered and settled again when he tapped the glass. But Flower was right; unlike the steering column of the Golden Islanders’ flying boats, there seemed to be no way to turn the plinth.

“Where’s the seed?” River demanded from the doorway. “Is it in that thing?”

Flower shook her head, bared her teeth in an unconscious

grimace. "I don't know, give me a moment. We'll have to search this room. There might be more hidden doors."

Jade glanced up, started to speak, then frowned. "Wait, where's Balm?"

Moon turned. Balm wasn't in the room, and wasn't outside with Stone. *Oh no*, he thought, and felt his heart sink. The last time he had seen her, she had been on the waterling's head, just before it had swatted Moon out of the air. She hadn't been there when Stone had hit the creature from behind.

Flower looked up from the plinth, her brow furrowed with worry. "What? Where is she?"

River and Chime turned away from the doorway and stepped back out into the mortuary chamber. "I don't see her," River said. "Unless she's..." He hesitated, and stared at the waterling where it lay sprawled across the floor.

Jade threw a worried look at Moon, and started after River.

Moon caught her wrist to stop her at the threshold. "Stay here and help Flower search for the seed. Let us look for Balm." If they had to dig Balm's crushed body out from under the waterling, he didn't want Jade to see it.

She hesitated, her spines flicking uncertainly. She clearly wanted to search for Balm herself, but they had to find the seed and get out of here, before Ardan sent anything else after them. After a moment, she nodded reluctantly and turned back to Flower.

Moon stepped out of the dome. Esom still hovered uncertainly by the doorway, nervously watching Stone. "Should I help them look for the seed?" he asked. "I know you don't trust me, and I don't want to..." He waved a hand helplessly. "... provoke someone to kill me, but we should hurry before—"

"Ask Flower," Moon told him, distracted. Chime and River moved around the still-twitching body of the waterling, looking for any sign that Balm was trapped under it. He wanted to get over there and help.

Esom drew breath to speak. Then Stone hissed a warning. With a loud plop, five of Ardan's warden-creatures appeared, barely paces away.

Four of them leapt for Stone's head, one came at Moon. Moon yelled a warning to the others, and slung Esom away from the claws that reached for him. Stone tried to hold onto the dome's panel, but the wardens hit him hard, knocked him off balance and away from the dome. The panel snapped shut.

Moon snarled in fury and slashed at the wide, fanged mouth of the warden bearing down on him. It slammed him to the floor, its weight crushed him down, and he sunk his claws into its jaw. He barely held it back from biting his head off.

Hot ichor washed over his hands. The warden jerked back and howled. Moon ripped it across the eyes and scrambled up in time to see more wardens pop into existence all over the chamber, as far as he could see.

Stone leapt for the nearest group and Moon lunged after him. Jade and Flower were trapped in the dome. *Unless there's a latch—there has to be a way to open it from—* Then the wardens charged him, and Moon had no time to think of anything but fighting.

Moon and Stone fell back across the big chamber, fighting warden after warden. Stone took them on directly. Moon darted in to slash at them, harried them into Stone's reach, or finished off the walking wounded. Moon was peripherally aware of Chime and River doing the same, protecting their flanks. He kept getting glimpses of Esom, as he scrambled to stay behind them and away from the wardens. They must have killed dozens of the creatures but more came. Ardan was throwing every resource he had against them.

Then River called out, "We're nearly to the wall! What now?"

Moon risked a look and saw they were nearly against the far wall of the chamber. There was a wide chased-metal gallery built across it, about thirty paces up, probably meant as an access to the tombs there. Unless Ardan had wardens who could fly, it would provide a needed respite. "Get up there!" he shouted to the others.

River bounced up to the gallery, and Chime snatched up Esom and followed. Stone pitched one last warden across the chamber and climbed after them, Moon close behind.

Panting, dripping with the creatures' bitter blood, Moon gripped the railing, looking over the chamber. He couldn't see the dome from here. It was lost in the shadows. He could see the scattered, bleeding bodies of the wardens. The dozen or so still on their feet edged forward. And past the first row of pillars stood a group of blue-pearl guards. They surrounded a single robed figure: Ardan.

"He's here," Moon said, glancing at the others. "The groundling magister."

Chime and River were breathing hard, their scales covered with claw marks, the nicks and scratches of near-misses. Esom was flattened back against the wall, his expression numb with fear. Stone

curled around the railing, most of him resting on the delicately incised metal of the gallery floor, tail dangling and deceptively relaxed. He snorted derisively, making his opinion of Ardan clear.

The magister moved forward, to the last row of pillars, barely fifty paces from them. He called out, "Please, let me speak to you!"

"We can hear you," Moon said, pitching his voice to carry.

Ardan stepped forward again, and shaded his eyes against the glare of the nearest vapor-light. Squinting up at them, he said, "Surely we can come to some agreement."

Moon hesitated. He knew Ardan had a talent for sounding sincere, but it was hard to resist the appeal. Ardan must not know Jade and Flower were trapped in the dome. If they could just talk him into letting them get back over to it...

Esom whispered urgently, "Don't believe anything he says."

River hissed in contempt. "He only wants to talk because we're winning."

"We're not winning by that much," Chime said, keeping a nervous eye on the wardens.

Stone jerked his head, telling Moon to go ahead and talk.

Moon spread his wings and dropped down from the gallery to land lightly on the floor.

Ardan regarded him for a moment. He was breathing roughly too, as if he had been in a battle. It must have cost him an enormous effort to send all these creatures after them. It was a relief that it wasn't much easier to send them than to fight them. Ardan said, "I should have taken even more precautions, but I didn't realize Esom knew where the seed was." He hesitated, and looked up at the balcony again. "I didn't realize there were so many of you here, or that one was so... formidable. I don't see Rift. I assume he's unhurt?"

So all their speculation was right and the seed was here, hidden in the dome. *At least all this wasn't for nothing*, Moon thought. "Why do you care about Rift? Worried you missed a chance to have a Raksura stuffed and mounted?"

Ardan's voice tightened. "He's my friend. I don't want him injured. He's told me what he can expect from his own people. Your reaction to him was proof enough of that."

"He stole our seed. He knew what that would do to the tree," Moon said, and thought, *He thinks Rift is here. He wants him to hear this*. "Give it back, and we'll leave. That's all we want." It was worth a

try.

“I’m afraid I can’t.” Ardan’s voice was low and intense. “I persuaded Rift to help me take it from the forest because I had no other choice. It is a powerful artifact, and it means the survival of everyone in this city.” He stepped forward, and his men spread out to either side of him, watching Moon nervously. “Over the turns, our own magic has waned. We have to use substitutes, objects that carry inherent power that can be transferred to the devices that keep the leviathan from sinking below the surface or thrashing until it destroys the city. When I brought the seed here, the other magisters were only days away from losing what little control over the creature we have.” He spread his hands. “You must understand. Your people can find another place to live. Mine have no choice.”

Moon said, “We both know that’s not true.”

Ardan’s face went still, and a flush of heat darkened the blue skin of his cheeks and forehead.

Moon’s spines twitched. He had meant the traders’ ships, that the people here could leave the city if the magisters and the other wealthy residents bought the use of them for an evacuation. But that wasn’t what Ardan had heard. *Jade was right*. It wasn’t a coincidence that the leviathan had moved further out to sea. *Ardan is controlling it*.

Ardan said, thickly, “Then I’m glad we had this conversation.”

Then the floor dissolved under Moon’s feet, crumbling to dust. He dropped, shot his wings out to stop himself. Air rushed straight up from below and he caught it, played it across his wings to stay aloft. Several of Ardan’s men weren’t so lucky, and flailed as they tumbled down toward a great dark space below, along with fragments of the floor.

Moon couldn’t see what was down there, where the wind came from. The thick stench of the leviathan filled the air. Moon twisted enough to get a look behind him. The balcony had broken into a twisted mass of metal supports, and Stone clung to a post. River and Chime clung to him, and Esom clung to Chime. *I’d tell Esom he was right, but I think he already knows*, Moon thought, and looked back up at Ardan.

The Magister had gone to his knees, his face turned dull blue-gray by the terrible effort of destroying the floor.

The rush of air, the leviathan’s breathing. Moon thought suddenly. That wind came from the leviathan itself. There was some opening just below them, and in a moment it would— Moon flapped, tried to

get out of the draft, shouted, “Stone, get away—”

The air reversed with a terrible suction as the creature inhaled. It dragged Moon down, tangled his wings. The pressure was terrible, irresistible. It dragged the air out of his lungs and made the edges of his vision go black. He flipped over in time to see it yank River and Chime away from their grip on Stone. Stone made a wild grab for them. The suction jerked him off the remnants of the balcony, shattered metal hurtling down after him.

Moon swore helplessly and used every bit of his remaining strength to wrench his wings in. The force of it rolled his body over again, so at least he could see what they were plunging into. He had the terrible feeling he already knew.

All he could see was a great dark space, then his eyes adjusted. It was a crater, a giant black crater in the back of the leviathan, surrounded by a ridge of scaly skin. *An air hole*, Moon thought, sick with dread, as they dropped helplessly down into it.

Chapter Fifteen

They fell, dragged down by the powerful suction of the leviathan's breath. Moon couldn't even struggle, the pressure so intense he couldn't breathe. He thought his body would snap in half before he had a chance to smash into anything.

At first the darkness was complete. Then Moon caught flashes of blue light, just enough to show him that he was falling past a dark-gray surface ridged by scaly bone rings. He had a hard time believing this was really happening. He had always thought he would probably die by being eaten. Being inhaled by a leviathan wasn't a fate he had considered.

Then he slammed into something ropy and semi-porous, bounced off it with stunning force, and tumbled through an opening in the surface.

Knocked nearly out of his wits, it took Moon moments to realize he was falling free into a huge open space lit by an eerie blue glow, that the pressure was gone. He spread his wings and cupped them to slow his headlong plunge.

Thick webs stretched from all sides of the big chamber and formed a shadowy, complicated architecture, as if he were surrounded by the towers and galleries of a near-transparent city. The moving lights were small bundles of blue-tinged phosphorescence, suspended on long poles and somehow attached to the heads of creatures like giant slugs that crawled ponderously over the heavy cables of the webs. The light from those ambulatory bundles lit other shapes, big ones, small ones, that moved through the webs, hopped from strand to strand, or glided on ridged wings.

Oh, this is... different. Horrible and different. Moon's throat was too dry to swallow, but at least he could breathe. He looked up, saw Stone not far above him, and the smaller figures of Chime and River. Chime had, somehow, managed to hold on to Esom. Moon wasn't sure Esom was going to thank him for that; it might have been a kinder end to die in the fall down onto the leviathan's skin.

Moon looked down and spotted a solid mass below, some distance from the walls. It was an oblong shape, a couple of hundred paces

long and wide, suspended near the center of the space. Moon aimed for it and landed on the rubbery surface, then pulled his wings in and dropped to a defensive crouch. River and Chime landed on either side of him, Esom still clinging tightly to Chime. Stone reached it a few moments later. He snapped his wings in and crouched low.

The bulk of Stone's body looming over them gave Moon what was probably a false sense of security. He peered into the dim blue light; nothing seemed to be coming for them, but that had to be just a matter of time. "What is this place?"

"Didn't we fall into the monster?" River said, a thread of panic in his voice. "Where are we?"

"Parasites." It was Esom who gasped it out. "Colonies of parasites..."

"He's right," Chime said, sounding near the edge of panic himself. "These creatures live inside the leviathan. They could be animals, or intelligent, I don't know."

Moon looked around again, his gorge rising, and wished he could unhear that.

"They carved out this space, out of its body? Wouldn't that hurt?" River said, clearly still dazed from horror.

"Apparently they don't care," Moon snapped. Next to him, Stone made a low, soft growl and nudged Moon with a claw. Moon turned, saw Stone was staring at a thin column about twenty paces away. Glinting faintly in the blue light, it stretched up out of a ridged aperture in the gray rubbery ground. Moon looked up, traced its path upward... to where it connected with a thick strand of web crossing the chamber. *Oh, no...* This mass wasn't suspended from the web; it was creating the web. "What are we standing on?"

Chime and River turned to look, just as the surface under them rippled. From the near end of the mass, an immense head suddenly loomed up. It had multiple glaring eyes and a round, fanged mouth. Spiked tentacles stretched up from its sides, as the whole creature started to curve up and inward toward them.

Stone surged over their heads and hit the creature's face claws first. Moon yelled, "Up and over, now!" and sprang into the air.

He couldn't tell if Chime and River understood his incoherent command or if they were just blindly following him. As they took flight, Moon saw a tentacle whip toward Chime, who was still burdened with Esom. Moon twisted toward it and slashed at the slick surface. It twitched at him, missing Chime, just as another tentacle

slapped at Moon's leg and knocked him into a sideways tumble.

He rolled, frantically tried to get his wings under control, and saw the tentacle dive toward him. Then River swooped past and swiped at the tentacle with his foot claws. It flinched, hesitating just long enough for Moon to drop out of reach.

Still falling away, Moon looked up at the creature. From the bottom it had a beetle-like carapace, the edges bristling with tentacles. It roared as Stone whipped over its head and gave it one last swipe with his tail. Stone tore through the tentacles that reached for him and dropped out of its range.

There was movement all over the web as the big creature turned ponderously on its supporting strand to follow them. There was no place to go but down, and Moon dove.

He dropped until the passage narrowed again and the lighted webs were left behind. He had no idea where he was going, and the light was running out, when Chime shouted, "Wait, stop!"

Moon swerved in toward the wall and found a perch to cling to. Chime hit the wall next to him and gripped it tightly. River landed on the far side of Chime, and Stone slammed into a spot just above them.

"There!" Chime pointed urgently at something about ten paces below. "We'll be safe if we go that way!"

"Safe?" River growled. "We were standing on something's belly!"

"But we have to go that way!" Chime sounded frantically certain. "All right, it's not safe, but it's better than this!"

Moon had no intention of arguing. He swung down, scrabbled along the wall, and felt the edge of an opening. It was a rough-edged hole in the creature's flesh, about ten paces across. "This way, come on!"

Chime climbed down and slipped past him into the passage, as Esom gasped something in his own language. River hissed reluctantly as he followed. Stone's large form moved down, and hung onto the wall over the opening. "You're too big," Moon told him. "Shift, I'll catch you!"

For a long heartbeat he didn't think Stone would do it, from stubbornness or fear of being so vulnerable here or both. "Come on!" Moon yelled. "There's no other way!"

Then Stone shifted. Moon lunged forward and grabbed his arm; the sudden weight nearly jerked him off the wall. Stone managed to grip Moon's shoulder and dragged himself up. Moon heaved, lashed

his tail, and hauled them both through the opening.

They tumbled down over a bumpy surface, into complete darkness, and landed hard with Stone on top. Moon felt Stone sit up, heard him fumble in his pack for their light. Esom's harsh breathing sounded from a few paces to Moon's left, and Chime and River were putting out such a fear-scent he could smell them even over the leviathan's stench. Stone managed to get the rock uncovered and the light glowed from between his fingers as he held it up.

They were in a passage maybe fifteen paces wide, the rough, lumpy walls and floor a sickly blue color. Stalactites covered the ceiling, leaking a chalky-colored ichor. Moon pushed away from Stone and shoved to his feet. The passage wound off into the creature's body and split into multiple tunnels, each disappearing into darkness. He could still hear, distant and muffled, the familiar rush-pause-rush of the leviathan's breath.

Chime and River crouched nearby, Esom huddled between them. "So where are we now?" River said. From his expression, he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

Chime turned to the nearest wall and ran his hand over it. "I think these are teeth marks. I think something gnawed its way through here."

Moon looked down the dark tunnel again. Revulsion made his skin creep under his scales. "Another parasite?"

Chime nodded, his eyes wide and frightened. "Maybe more than one."

Stone pushed to his feet with a half-snarl. "We'll follow it. Maybe it got out." He paused and glanced at Moon, his expression opaque. "Thanks."

Moon flicked his spines in a half-shrug, avoiding his gaze. "We need to move."

River started forward and hissed in disgust as his frills brushed against a dripping stalactite. Chime followed, but Esom still huddled on the floor. Moon reached down, caught him by the shoulders, and pulled him to his feet.

Esom stared blankly. The right lens of his spectacles was cracked and his eyes were shocky. "Esom, you have to stay with us." Moon couldn't think of anything reassuring to say. They were trapped inside a leviathan, standing in a tunnel gnawed out by giant parasites. Going blank with terror was a perfectly rational way to react, especially for a groundling.

Esom blinked, took a gasping breath. “I— Yes, of course.” Awareness came back into his eyes, and he nodded sharply. “I’m fine, I’m really fine. I just had a moment there.”

If they ever got out of this, Moon was going to have a moment of his own. A long one. Tugging Esom along, he moved after the others.

They picked their way cautiously along, the light making shadows leap across the weird shapes of the stalactites. The tunnels formed a honeycomb, split off, then rejoined again. Whatever had chewed out all this, it hadn’t needed to make an even surface to walk on, and they had to clamber over lumps and broken chunks. Esom had the most difficulty, stumbling and breathing harshly. Stone, hampered by his groundling form, couldn’t move fast either.

The quiet wore on Moon’s nerves, and he couldn’t stop thinking about Jade, and Flower. And poor Balm. And it was his fault they were down here. He said, “Ardan did this because he thought I knew he’d been lying all this time. He can do more than just keep the leviathan from sinking, he’s steering it, telling it where to move and when and how far.”

Chime said, “It’s not your fault. He was going to get rid of us anyway. He was just making sure Rift wasn’t with us.” He glanced at Moon. “He must really like Rift. That’s very creepy.”

Esom said, slowly, “He wouldn’t be afraid of the people. He’s too powerful.” He sounded better, calmer, though his voice was still shaky. “It’s the other magisters, like Lethen. They must not realize he can send the leviathan anywhere he wants. He’s doing it to keep control of the traders, moving it so the ones who don’t pay him off can’t find it.”

Too bad we can’t tell them about it, Moon thought bitterly. The resulting battle would be interesting to watch, but not much help to them. The other magisters wouldn’t want to give the seed back, either.

Then Stone said, “Chime, how did you know this passage was here? Did you feel it?”

“Yes. As we got closer, I just knew it was there in the wall. It hurt, like a—” Chime waved a hand beside his head. “I can’t describe it.”

“I thought you weren’t a mentor anymore,” River said, making it sound like an accusation. “That’s what you told Pearl.”

“I know what I told Pearl. I’m not a mentor anymore.” Chime’s spines flicked in irritation. “This is different. It’s not augury, it’s... flashes of insight.”

Stone said, “Can you tell if that big spider thing is coming down

here after us?"

"The one we landed on?" Chime shook his spines uneasily. "No, I can't tell."

"But it's too big to get into these passages," Esom protested, stumbling after them.

Moon wasn't going to explain, but River said, darkly, "It could eat its way through here, just like the things that made this tunnel."

Esom didn't reply for a moment. Then he said, bleakly, "Of course it could."

It was hard to judge the passage of time, but Moon didn't think they had traveled much of a distance when Stone said, "Here we go." He stopped and held the light high. It fell on an irregular hole in the top of the passage that led upward. "That could go all the way to the outer skin."

"It's worth a try," Moon said in relief. It might be the way this particular set of parasites had gotten down here in the first place. Even if it didn't go all the way through the outer skin, if there was room for Stone to shift, he might be able to tear an opening for them to slip through.

"Wait." Esom's expression was pained and reluctant. "As much as I want to get out of here... there's a magical source that way." He pointed down the bigger tunnel that wound off through the leviathan's flesh. "If it's your seed, I don't know how or why it would be down here, but—"

No, Moon wanted to say, *we need to get out now, we need to go after Jade and Flower*. "Are you sure?"

Esom winced in resignation. "Unfortunately, yes. Believe me, I'd rather go up."

Stone turned to Chime. "Is he right? Can you feel it?"

Chime's spines ruffled again. "No. I'm not a mentor anymore."

Stone eyed him deliberately. "You knew there was a barrier over the outer door."

A muscle worked in Chime's jaw. He said, flatly, "I can't do magic like Esom does."

"How do you know you can't?" Esom challenged. "Did you ever try?"

Chime hissed at him, and Esom drew back, affronted.

"I hate trusting the groundling, but we have to look." River faced

Stone. “We can’t come all this way and—”

“We know,” Moon snapped. He looked at Stone. “We’ll take the other tunnel.”

Stone gave him a grim nod.

They followed the bigger tunnel, passing two more passages that led directly upward. Moon gritted his back teeth and resisted the urge to alter their course.

Moon sensed the change ahead before he saw or heard anything. He halted abruptly. The others froze in place behind him, but Esom stumbled. It didn’t matter. Moon had the feeling that whatever blocked the airflow ahead already knew they were here. Nothing came at them, but after a moment he heard movement, scraping, a low grunt.

Moon eased forward. As the tunnel curved, he saw another narrow passage that intersected with it at a sharp angle. A group of beings climbed up it toward them.

They had mottled gray-white bodies, heavily muscled, with oblong heads, eyes protected by heavy folds, and wide mouths. Their skin was made up of tough armor plates, overlapping like scales. Moon realized these were the same pallid creatures he had seen in the space below the city, that bore a superficial resemblance to the big tree frogs from the suspended forest. *So the tunnels that lead upward probably do go all the way out*, he thought. Several pushed forward to block the main tunnel, the creatures in the back jostling each other for a look at the Raksura.

“What do they want?” Chime whispered nervously.

He had spoken in Kedaic, which everyone except River had been speaking for Esom’s benefit. It was a surprise when the creature in the lead rasped in the same language, “These tunnels belong to the Thluth. What do you want here?”

“We need to get past,” Moon said, his voice tight with tension. “That’s all.”

“You use our tunnels?” The leader’s mouth split in a wide, fanged grin. It had the largest, sharpest teeth Moon had ever seen in something groundling-sized, well-suited for gnawing through leviathan hide. It nodded toward Esom, who stood frozen behind Chime. “We let you—if you give us something to eat. One of them will do.”

Moon heard Chime’s and River’s spines rattle in reflex, and Stone made a derisive hiss. The skin under Moon’s claws started to itch. He

said, "That better be a joke." He had had a bad day, and this was about all he could take.

The leader surged forward aggressively and grinned, its hot, foul breath washing over him. It said, "No joke. Give us food."

Moon slashed it across the throat, his claws sliding between the armor plates to sink into the thin line of vulnerable white skin. Hot blood splashed on his scales as the creature gurgled and staggered back. The other Thluth caught it as it sunk to the ground. Moon said, "You want any more, or is that going to be enough for you?"

The other Thluth drew away, watching him warily, and some prudently scrambled back down the side passage. Moon stayed where he was, flexing his claws, as Stone prodded Chime and Esom past. River eased by after them. Moon followed, watching as the Thluth dragged their leader's body away.

They continued up the tunnel. After a moment, Esom said shakily, "Thank you for not feeding me to them. I appreciate—"

"Later," Stone told him, and flicked a look back at Moon. "Don't talk right now."

They didn't pass any other intersecting passages. The tunnel itself began to get smaller, rougher, and they had to duck under the stalactites. Moon set his jaw, and suppressed the urge to go back and kill a few more Thluth. They had demanded tribute for passage to a dead end.

But as the tunnel narrowed to a point where Moon thought they would have to turn around, they came to a large hole chewed out of the wall.

Stone stopped in the entrance and tasted the air as he held up the light, though all Moon could smell was rotting leviathan.

"This could be something," Stone muttered, and stepped through the opening.

Moon followed with the others, and climbed through into a round chamber. It stretched upward, far beyond their light, the ceiling lost in darkness. A round column in the center plunged down into the leviathan's flesh.

Moon paced impatiently around the chamber to make certain it was a dead end. He didn't know why the Thluth had chewed this space out, but there was nothing here for them. "This isn't it. We need to keep moving."

"No, we're in the right place," Esom said. He had stepped to the

edge of the center shaft to examine the column. "I don't think this is the source, but arcane emanations are echoing through it." He glanced at them. "I meant the source of the magical power—"

Teeth gritted, Chime said, "They understood you."

"—must be in contact with it," Esom finished stubbornly.

Stone tilted his head, staring hard at the column. "He's right. That's metal under there."

"What?" Moon came back to his side and squinted to see. He had thought it was just another part of the leviathan's flesh. Looking more closely, he saw verdigrised metal glinting between calcified lumps and dried ooze.

Chime went to the wall of the chamber and ran his hand over the surface. "I don't see any teeth marks. I don't think the parasites made this chamber. Maybe the groundlings cut it out so they could put that thing here."

Moon turned back to the column. Maybe they had found something after all. "So this is anchoring part of the city to the leviathan?"

"Maybe," Esom said, "But it must be in contact with something magical—"

"Up there somewhere?" River demanded, looking up into the space above them.

Stone held the light up, but all they could see was the column stretching up into darkness. Stone said, "River, take the light, climb up there. Not the column, go up the wall."

River took the light-rock, clutched it in his teeth, and started up the chamber's wall. It was the first time Moon had ever seen him do anything without a bad attitude. They watched his progress, the light growing smaller, until they stood in heavy darkness. Moon estimated River had gone about a hundred paces up the wall when he stopped. Moon hissed out a curse. River's light shone on the roof of the chamber, where the leviathan's flesh had grown back to enclose the column and close off any passage or opening. "If there was anything up there, we can't get to it," he said, frustrated.

Then Chime said, "Look, look at this!"

Moon turned around. It was too dark to see Chime, but it was obvious what he was pointing at: a faintly glowing shape outlined against the column. It was round, like a panel in the metal, with something behind it giving off a faint illumination.

Moon stepped close, stumbled on Chime's tail, and moved him out of the way. He ran his hands over the panel to feel for seams under the encrustations. "Careful," Esom said anxiously. "An arcane power source could be very dangerous."

"The seed wouldn't glow, would it?" Chime said, sounding doubtful. "Unless they did something drastic to it."

Stone growled in frustration. "Get it open."

Moon growled back at him and dug his claws into the crusted ooze to strip it off the old metal. River climbed back down the wall, bringing the light-rock. The glow from behind the panel faded as the chamber grew brighter, but Moon found the seams. He worked his claws in and yanked on the panel. It gave way so abruptly he stumbled backward. River pushed off the wall, landed beside Moon, and held out the light-rock. Behind the panel was a small compartment, and mounted in it was a discolored metal plaque set with rough crystals, about the size of Moon's palm.

Esom said, "That's it, that's the arcane source I've been sensing!"

Moon paced away, too angry to speak. *That's not it. Jade and Flower are still trapped up there, Balm could be dead, and we don't even have the damn seed to bargain with.*

Behind him, Stone hissed with bitter disappointment. "It's not the seed," River said, pointedly speaking in Kedaic so Esom could understand him.

"I never said it was your seed," Esom said, exasperated. "I said—"

"What is it doing to the leviathan?" Stone asked him, cutting across the budding argument. "It has to be doing something, or it wouldn't be down here."

"I don't know." Esom lifted his hands helplessly. "It could be helping to control the creature—"

"It has to be," Chime broke in, his spines shaking with excitement. "Think about where we are. We went a long way down, but we're not that far from where we started."

"Maybe five hundred paces, give or take." Moon tilted his head, and found that place inside himself that always knew where south was. "We're below the mortuary temple, just in the center—"

Chime finished, "We're under that dome, under that steering device." He thumped the column. "This thing could be part of it."

"Huh." Stone looked up the column again.

“But we can’t get out that way,” River said impatiently. “There’s no opening. The flesh closes in around the top of this pillar-thing.”

“Yes, but...” Moon stepped back to the column, reached into the compartment and touched the crystal thing gingerly.

“I still think you should be careful,” Esom persisted.

Moon nudged the device a little. It wiggled back and forth, but didn’t seem to do anything. “Could this be how they control the leviathan?”

They all looked at Esom, who wiped his forehead wearily. “I don’t know. Our ship the *Klodifore* works by arcane power, using the metora stone as fuel. But it still has a wheel, a steering mechanism. There wasn’t anything like that on the device we saw. Not that I could tell, anyway.”

“But it’s not a ship, it’s a creature.” Chime eased forward and leaned close to the compartment. “Maybe the device controls a spell that lets the groundlings communicate with it.”

Esom nodded, preoccupied. “Oh, that’s a thought. Yes, I think that’s likely.”

If they were right... it didn’t matter how many seeds Ardan stole, they were all useless without this. This could be the whole key to Ardan’s power, the power of all the magisters. Moon reached for the crystalstudded metal piece, gripped it, and twisted it free.

As it snapped loose he felt the ground underfoot tremble. The rhythmic rush of the leviathan’s breath halted mid-inhale, the silence sudden and absolute. Stone cocked his head thoughtfully, listening. Esom and Chime were wide-eyed in alarm, while River’s spines twitched nervously. The moment stretched, then the creature’s breath whooshed out in a long sigh.

As the breathing resumed, Chime said, “It felt that. I don’t know what happened, exactly, but it felt that.”

Moon weighed the metal piece in his hand. “Good. Maybe Ardan felt it too.”

□

They went back down the Thluth tunnel, and took one of the vertical passages upward. The Thluth didn’t appear to demand tribute again.

The passage worked its way up through the leviathan’s hide along a narrow and twisty path. After a short distance it turned into a

vertical shaft, too steep for Esom or for Stone in his groundling form.

Esom groaned but didn't otherwise protest being carried by Chime again. River hesitated, looking dubiously at Stone. Stone hissed in annoyance and turned to Moon.

Moon supposed that if Stone had to be carried, he would rather it be by another consort, no matter how awkward. So they started up with Stone's warm weight hanging on to Moon's neck, and it was just as awkward as Moon could possibly have imagined.

The pocked surface was slick and pieces chipped off under their claws, but the leviathan's breathing grew steadily louder, a welcome sign that they were nearing an opening to the surface. River, unencumbered, got a little ahead. They climbed in silence for a while, until Stone muttered, "I remember why the Arbora hate this."

"It's not like we have a choice," Moon answered, concentrating on feeling for the next good claw-hold.

There was another long silence, broken only by whispers from somewhere below, where Esom seemed to be interrogating Chime about mentor abilities. Chime's answers were tinged with irritation. Then Stone said, "I don't kill solitaires just because they're solitaires. And I would never have killed you."

It was so unexpected, Moon's claws almost slipped off the wall. Stone waited until he recovered, then continued, "If I'd decided you were crazy, or lying to me, I would have left you behind. I wanted you with me at Sky Copper so I could watch your reaction, make sure you'd never seen a court before. But by the time we got there, I'd already made my decision." He added, "You little idiot."

Moon hissed reflexively. After a moment, he said, "Sorry." Deeply reluctant, he admitted, "I'm still not... good at this."

"You'll get over it," Stone told him.

Above them, River hissed to get Moon's attention. He looked up and realized they were very near the top. The space above them was dark, and the hole through the last layer of hide was small. A little ahead of Moon, River stopped just below the opening. He pointed to himself, then up. He was saying he should go first, since he was the only one not carrying someone. *I hate it when he's right.* Moon nodded for him to go ahead.

River climbed to the lip of the opening, stopped to peer out, then scrambled over the edge.

After a tense moment, he leaned back down to whisper, "Come up."

Moon gave Stone a boost, then followed him. As he climbed out, he knew where he was by scent and sound before his eyes adjusted to the dim green glow from the phosphorescent molds. They were in the underground space below the city, the stone of its foundations high above, supported by giant pillars and columns. The foundations were much lower here than in the area below Ardan's tower, which was closer to the midpoint of the leviathan. The highest supporting arch was barely fifty paces above their heads.

Esom scrambled out with Chime right behind him. Chime stood and looked around, his spines flicking uneasily. Esom collapsed on the lumpy leviathan hide and said in relief, "I never thought I'd be glad to see this place again. Now it looks homey and welcoming."

"I wouldn't go that far," Moon said. He turned to Stone and pointed north, toward the leviathan's head. "The mortuary temple is back that way."

Stone's mouth twisted in an ironic grimace. He said, "Let's hope Ardan's not expecting us." Then he shifted.

Stone's larger body flowed into being so fast that Esom yelped and bumped into Chime as he flinched away. "Sorry," he muttered. "I'm just not used to it when he does that."

Chapter Sixteen

Moon led the way across the dark space, finding the way back toward the mortuary temple. They moved in long bounds, and Chime carried Esom. That had to be rough on Esom, though

Chime had partially extended his wings so he could make each landing a fairly light one. Esom didn't complain, but kept a grimly tight grip on Chime's collar flanges. There wasn't another choice. They had to move fast and they couldn't leave Esom behind down here.

The foundations and heavy buttresses above them dropped even lower, the columns grew wider. Then Stone came to an abrupt halt, head cocked as he listened. They all stopped and froze into place. Moon tasted the air, but all he could scent was rot and leviathan. It was hard to hear over the rush of the leviathan's breath, but he was certain there was a voice from somewhere to the east, not far away. An oddly familiar voice. Incredulous, Chime whispered, "Is that Root?"

Before Moon could answer, River interposed, "Of course it is. He's the only one who can't shut up."

"He's not the only one," Moon told him. Stone growled low in his throat and bounded away to follow the thread of sound.

The supporting pillars were closer together through this area, blocking the view, but as they traveled Moon started to make out some movement in the hazy light ahead. At least it was no mystery how the others had gotten down here. Vine and Drift would have seen Ardan's men enter the mortuary from the main entrance, and had gone back to the tower-camp for help. Now they must be trying to find the underground entrance to the temple, which was what Moon would have done in their place.

Ahead, dim light glittered off scales and Moon spotted the Raksura, gathered with their backs to a pillar. He couldn't tell what threat they faced... Then his eyes adjusted and he thought in disgust, *Oh, that's typical.* The Raksura confronted a large group of the pale armored Thluth.

Moon shot ahead of Stone, River, and Chime. Coming up behind the Thluth, he swarmed up the nearest pillar, hopped to the next to

get above them. In the group of Raksura he saw Vine, Floret, Song, Root, Drift...*And Balm!* She was leading the others, and faced the Thluth leader, her spines bristling. Relief was sharp and almost painful. Balm was alive; he just wished he could tell Jade.

And there was one extra Raksura: Rift was here, too.

Moon saw enough to tell the confrontation with the Thluth was angry. The Thluth seemed to be demanding tribute and Balm and the others weren't taking it much better than Moon had. The Thluth leader spoke, pushed forward aggressively. Balm lunged to swipe him back.

Then Stone slammed between the pillars and sent the Thluth scrambling frantically away. Moon leapt down behind the leader.

He wasn't certain if this was the same tribe of Thluth, but apparently it didn't matter. The leader spun around, saw Moon, and bellowed a wordless warning. It wasn't needed, since the other Thluth were already loping rapidly into the shadows. The leader bolted away, desperate to catch up with the others.

Chime and River arrived, and Esom staggered away as soon as Chime set him on his feet. Then Karsis darted out from behind the pillar and flung herself at Esom. They hugged each other, speaking rapidly in their own language, Karsis laughing with relief. Moon tried not to be envious.

"Balm!" Chime shouted. He grabbed her in a hug, and released her immediately when she gasped, "Ow!"

"Are you all right?" Chime asked her worriedly, holding onto her arm to steady her. "We couldn't find you. We thought you were dead!"

"No, I'm fine," Balm insisted. At close range, she didn't look fine. She had scratches and dark patches in her golden scales, and her left wingjoin had a dark, livid scrape. She asked, "But what happened? I thought you were trapped."

"We got out the hard way," Chime told her. "It was horrible, but it worked."

Drift greeted River enthusiastically, Root bounced around trying to greet everybody, and the others gathered around, excited, relieved, and demanding immediate answers. Only Rift hung back, watching them uneasily. "We thought the groundling sorcerer had you," Floret said to Moon. "Balm saw—"

Balm frowned suddenly. "Wait, where's Jade and Flower?"

Moon said it quickly, to get it over with. “They didn’t get out. They were trapped in that dome we found. We opened it, but then the warden-creatures attacked, and the door slid shut.”

That put an end to all the relieved excitement. Balm hissed in dismay, and looked from Moon to Stone. “Are they all right? Can the sorcerer get to them?”

“We don’t know.” Moon didn’t want to think about that right now. “How did you get away?”

Balm’s spines flicked in agitation, but she let her question go. “The waterling threw me back toward the other side of the chamber, and I hit the wall and fell to the floor. I must have been knocked out for a time. The next thing I knew, some groundlings ran right past me. When I managed to stand, those warden-creatures swarmed me and I flew up the first passage I found. It was the one that went outside to the plaza, where the guards were. They shot darts at me, but I got past them.” Her expression was bleak. “I found Vine and Drift, and we tried to get back in through the entrance in the flooded area, but the magical barrier was still there. So we went to the tower to get the others, and we decided to come down here to look for an underground passage into the temple.”

“That’s where we’re headed now,” Chime told her.

“You brought the solitary and the groundling woman?” River demanded, with an angry gesture at Rift. “What was the sense of that?”

“I told her not to do it,” Drift said. He sounded self-righteous about it, despite the fact that he had a fist-sized swelling around his left eye and another one low on his jaw. Moon hadn’t seen any of the Thluth land a blow, so it had to have happened earlier.

Rift, who had been hovering in the back to listen, twitched uneasily and looked away. Unexpectedly, it was Floret who rattled her spines and said, “The groundling woman showed us where the entrance to this place was, the one above the leviathan’s tail.”

Her voice flat and angry, Balm added, “We couldn’t leave them there. Rift would run away, and if we were all killed, Karsis would be stuck up in that tower unable to get out. I was going to just let her go, but she said she wanted to come along to find her brother.”

Moon flicked his spines at River, and told Balm, “No, you did right.” Stone touched her frills lightly with one claw tip, sympathy and reassurance combined. Moon looked around at the others. “We need to go.”

Balm nodded. “We think it’s this way.”

As the others moved away, Moon stopped her with a hand on her arm. He asked quietly, “What happened to Drift?” If Rift had tried to escape and Drift had gotten hurt stopping him, Moon needed to know.

Balm’s spines twitched at the memory. “He tried to take over the group, so I had to fight him. I didn’t trust him to do the right thing, and I knew we had to get back to Jade fast.” She hesitated, then in a mix of pride and relief said, “When I won, I was still afraid the others wouldn’t follow me, but they did.”

Moon thought that was the important part. Balm had to know that she could physically beat Drift. It was the fact that the others had not only stood by and let her, but supported her over him afterward, tacitly acknowledging Balm’s status in the court, even over one of Pearl’s favorites. He said, “Good.”



It was better hidden than Moon had anticipated, and they found it only because Stone was able to follow the stench of the fermenting edivine and rot, buried in with the leviathan’s pervasive scent.

The tunnel entrance was in the deeper shadow up near the city’s foundation, in a buttress that joined two pillars, about fifty paces above the leviathan’s skin. When Moon climbed up to investigate, he found a broad walkway along the buttress, with the tunnel just above it, opening into a dark passage up through the layers of rock and metal.

Moon made the others stay below and climbed up with Chime and Floret, Chime in front to sense any magical barriers. The city’s foundation was much thinner here than it had been under Ardan’s tower. Barely twenty paces up, Chime hissed for them to stop, then climbed back down to report, “There’s a tunnel up there, pretty narrow. It stinks of those vines. It’s coming from the direction of the mortuary, going off toward the east.”

River hovered impatiently under the passage opening. “Come on, let’s go,” he said. “We have to find out what the sorcerer did with Jade and Flower.”

Moon, who hadn’t been able to think of anything else except what the sorcerer might be doing to Jade and Flower, managed not to give in to the impulse to drop back down and tear River’s head off. He said, “No, we scout first.” He didn’t intend to make any mistakes, or to let them all rush up there and find themselves running right into Ardan. “Floret, follow the tunnel back toward the mortuary, as far as

you can without being seen. See if there's anyone guarding it. Take Chime, to check for barriers."

Floret flicked her spines in acknowledgement and started to climb. Chime, nervous but determined, followed her. Moon dropped back out of the passage to wait, as River stomped away to sulk with Drift. But no one questioned the decision.

Stone settled under the opening to wait and Moon paced uneasily. It didn't help that the others were all sitting or standing there staring at him, even Karsis and Esom. This was much easier when Jade was here to take all the responsibility, and all Moon had to do was have the crazy ideas. It had been easier having responsibility only for himself.

Rift hovered a little apart from the others, his whole body suggesting reluctance to be anywhere near them, though he hadn't tried to run away. Seeing him again made Moon realize just how confused his feelings were. He felt sorry for Rift, he was deeply suspicious of him, he wanted to help him, he just wanted him to go away. Rift was a miserable reminder that there were pitfalls to living with the Raksuran courts that Moon hadn't even stumbled into yet. None of it was going to matter if they didn't get the seed back and get off this damn leviathan, but he couldn't stop his thoughts from drifting in that direction.

Balm looked up at the passage, worried and preoccupied. She said, "You think the sorcerer knows Jade and Flower are trapped in the dome?"

"He has to." Moon thought it was dangerous to assume anything else. "He would have wanted to open it to see if the seed was still there."

"Maybe they can fight him off," Song said. "There's two of them, and Flower's still pretty strong." She flicked her spines nervously, a young and deceptively delicate predator.

"Your friends might have been able to lock the door from the inside," Esom pointed out. "Or dismantle the mechanism that opens it, if it's not too complicated." Karsis elbowed him and he blinked and added, "Not that I think they wouldn't be able to figure out something complicated—"

"It's all right," Moon cut him off before he made it any worse. "We know what you mean."

Karsis cleared her throat. Obviously trying to distract everyone from Esom's gaffe, she asked Moon, "Is Jade your wife?"

In groundling terms, it was close enough. “Yes.”

With bitter emphasis, Rift said, “He’s a consort. It’s not like he had a choice. It’s not like anyone in a Raksuran court has a choice.”

And having Rift speak for him didn’t decrease Moon’s irritation. Moon said, pointedly, “I had a choice.”

Rift threw a glance at him, half-angry, half-wary. “To compete for a queen or to be a useless burden to the court?”

If Stone had heard that, he ignored it. Balm hissed and Song and Vine bristled angrily. Glaring at Rift in annoyance, Karsis said, “You know, I don’t think anyone here cares for your opinion. I know I never have.”

Rift barred his teeth at her. Then Root, seething with indignation, said, “Moon was a solitary, too, and he stays with Jade because he wants to.”

Rift stared at Moon, so incredulous his spines flattened. Vine thumped Root in the side of the head, and hissed, “No more talking. Ever.”

Moon set his jaw. Rift had always had a hold on him; now he would know what it was. Rift said, “That’s... Consorts don’t leave their courts...”

“Tell him the story,” Moon said. He walked away and circled around Stone to take up a position under the passage. Stone, proving that he had been listening, heaved a deeply annoyed sigh.

There was a long moment of awkward silence from the other side of the walkway, then Moon heard Balm speak quietly to Vine. Vine gestured and Rift, still badly shocked, followed him down the walkway to talk. Song shook her head grimly at Root, whose spines drooped with embarrassment.

Time seemed to drag. Standing still, without immediate danger as a distraction, Moon could feel every cut and slash that had penetrated his scales, the exhaustion dragging at him like a net, making his wings feel like they were iron weights. It had been a long time since he had shifted to groundling, but if he did it now he might fall down and not be able to get up again.

As they waited, everyone showed signs of fatigue: Balm’s spines were drooping, Root had trouble keeping his eyes open, and River leaned against a pillar, trying to pretend it wasn’t holding him up. There was only so much more of this they could take without a chance to eat and rest. He hoped Ardan was tired too, and feeling the strain of doing so much magic at once. But Moon was willing to bet Ardan had

had time to stop for a meal, and they hadn't.

There was a scrabbling in the passage above them, then Floret and Chime dropped out.

The others bounded over to gather around, Esom and Karsis hurrying after them. Floret reported, "We got all the way up to this room full of stinking vines in barrels. There were two blue groundlings in the corridor just past it. Chime said they belonged to the sorcerer."

"I didn't feel any barriers," Chime added. "I bet Ardan doesn't know about this way out."

Moon nodded, thinking it over. Ardan must believe that the people who were trading with the water travelers only used that doorway to the flooded street. "If the guards are there, then Ardan is still in the mortuary. Maybe he didn't get the dome open yet." And everyone on the leviathan must have felt the jolt when Moon had removed the crystal piece. Maybe Ardan had more to deal with at the moment than just the Raksura.

"But he must be trying to get it open," Chime said. "Even if we can get past the guards and get into the mortuary, he'll be right there."

"So how do we get past him?" Balm said, frustrated.

Moon shook his head. "We can't. We have to talk to him."

River snarled skeptically. "What, so he can feed us to the leviathan again?" Drift hissed agreement.

Moon didn't bother to argue that. The trick was going to be to make Ardan want to talk more than he wanted to get rid of them. He looked at Esom. "That spell you did, the one that made it so no one could see you and Karsis when you were trying to get out of the tower. Can you do that again?"

Esom straightened his cracked spectacles, and nodded. "Yes. You want me to use it so we can get back into the mortuary without anyone knowing we're there?"

"Will that work? Can you get past Ardan?"

"I... think so. I know I can hide myself and one other person, reliably." Esom hesitated, his expression uncertain. He admitted, "Ardan was always distracted when I tried the spell inside his tower."

"I can distract him," Rift said. He bristled his spines uneasily as everyone turned to stare at him. "He'll listen to me." He looked at Moon. "You know he will."

Behind them, Stone shifted to groundling. Esom flinched and cursed, Karsis just stared in fascination. Stone folded his arms and regarded Rift thoughtfully.

Rift threw him a frightened look but held his ground. Still focusing on Moon, he said, "You know it's true. He wants me back, doesn't he? He'll talk to me."

Moon let out his breath. Yes, Ardan wanted Rift back. Moon just wasn't sure what Rift wanted. "If you tell him about Esom's spell, what we're planning—"

"You'll kill me, I know." Rift glanced around at the others, spines lowered. "I didn't mean to hurt your court. I thought the colony tree was abandoned forever. If I'd known you were coming back—"

"That's not the point." Stone's voice cut across Rift's, silencing him immediately. It was the first time Stone had spoken directly to him. "That colony tree is our court."

Rift flattened his spines but said, "A court is Aeriad and Arbora, not the empty shell of a tree. For all I knew, your court had died out and I was doing the tree a favor, letting it die so it wouldn't live forever alone."

Stone grimaced, equal parts irritation and disgust, probably because Rift had given him an answer that was hard to argue with.

Moon asked Rift, "What do you want in return?"

If Rift said "Nothing," Moon wasn't going to believe him. Rift wasn't the self-sacrificing type, even if he did feel sorry about the colony tree. But Rift said, "When you find a way to leave the leviathan, take me with you. I want to go back to the forest Reaches. Ardan may want me back, but he'll never trust me again, and I can't trust him." His scales rippled uneasily. "And I'm sick of this place."

Moon thought it rang true, but he didn't quite trust his own judgment when it came to this. The others watched Rift with varying degrees of skepticism, doubt, and even a little sympathy. Moon looked at Balm. She studied Rift carefully, her eyes narrowed. She caught Moon's gaze, and gave him a grimace of doubt and a slow reluctant nod.

That summed up Moon's feelings accurately. He told Rift, "All right, we have a deal. Don't make me regret it."



Moon and Rift crept up the tunnel, climbed through a doorway that had been knocked out of the wall and into the edivine chamber.

Making their way silently past the stinking barrels, Moon saw there were now three blue-pearl guards in the passage. Most of their attention was on the upper part of the passage, as if they were expecting someone to try to come in through the smugglers' entrance. Which made it easy when Moon and Rift barreled in among them and knocked them flat.

Moon kicked a dart gun away from the one that was sprawled on the ground but still conscious, and told him, "Go tell Ardan that Moon and Rift want to talk. We have something he wants. Say that to him."

The man scrambled back, shoved to his feet, and ran.

Then they waited, Moon still and Rift pacing and lashing his tail. "What if he doesn't—" Rift began, and Moon hissed at him to be quiet. If Ardan didn't take the bait, he had no idea what they were going to do.

He heard the groundlings coming back, at least six of them. They approached cautiously up the passage, one carrying a small vapor-lamp. Another craned his neck, trying to see the two men still lying unconscious in the shadows. Moon said, "They're alive."

The guard stared, startled. Either by the fact that the Raksura hadn't killed and eaten the men as a matter of course, or that Moon had thought the other guards would care. The one in the lead said, stiffly, "The Magister will speak with you."

The others moved back against the walls. Moon walked past them and Rift followed. Moon caught a whiff of fear-sweat, but no one pulled out a dart gun at the last instant. As he and Rift went toward the passage into the mortuary, he heard the guards move to collect the unconscious men.

Esom and Stone would be waiting down in the edivine tunnel, and would follow them under the concealment of the spell. Esom could only make the spell big enough to conceal Stone in his groundling form, but Moon hadn't thought there would be any possibility of Stone sliding the dome's door open without Ardan noticing. But if Ardan tried to turn on them, Stone would be there. And Moon wasn't leaving without Jade and Flower.

They reached the doorway, where more nervous guards waited, and went past them, down the steps into the huge chamber. Moon had asked Rift if Ardan would have been able to make more warden-creatures by this time. Rift had said that even if he could, he wouldn't be able to let the creatures run loose with his guards here. Moon hoped he wasn't lying.

Shadows still clung to the upper half of the room, concealing the vaulted ceiling and the tops of the huge pillars, but more vapor-lamps had been lit. Moon spotted Ardan immediately. He waited under a lamp stand, about fifty paces from the doorway, with a large group of his guards spread out behind him. Beside Moon, Rift twitched uneasily.

Moon couldn't see the dome from here. It was somewhere past the shadowy outline of the undead waterling's tail. He couldn't see the spot on the far side of the chamber where Ardan had made the floor dissolve, either.

He started across the wide expanse of pavement toward Ardan, and tried not to look as if he was thinking about it disappearing under him at any moment. He and Rift stopped ten paces away from the sorcerer.

Ardan said, easily, "Rift, it's good to see you well. I hope they haven't treated you badly."

Rift twitched again, uncomfortable. He couldn't seem to meet Ardan's gaze. "No. Not... No."

Ardan turned to Moon and assessed him cautiously. "I didn't expect to see you alive."

It was nice of Ardan to admit it. "We're hard to kill," Moon said. "But it turned out for the best."

Ardan's mouth tightened. Moon thought, *he guessed we were responsible for the jolt, but he was hoping he was wrong*. Ardan said, "I felt the leviathan's distress. I take it that was something you did?"

"I don't think the leviathan was distressed. I think it was relieved." Moon hoped they were right about what the crystal piece did. If Ardan laughed in his face at this point, they were going to be in a lot of trouble. "The thing that was telling it what to do is gone."

Ardan's self-control wasn't quite perfect, and Moon could hear the tension in his voice. "What thing?"

"The metal piece with the crystals. The one down there, in the pillar that cuts through the leviathan's hide. The one that lets you use the power in the seed to send the leviathan all over the sea, anywhere you want."

There was an uneasy ripple among the guards, but no one seemed surprised or appalled—as if they suspected Ardan had been lying to the whole city but didn't like to hear it mentioned aloud.

Ardan's expression hardened into annoyance. He glanced at the

guards, and said, "You're wrong, of course, no one can steer the leviathan. But that device, the leviathan's bridle, is almost a legend. I've seen drawings, but..." With grim urgency, he said, "This creature could decide to sink at any moment. You could kill us all."

Yes, that's the point, Moon thought. He said, "Then give us the seed. It's useless to you without the bridle, isn't it? You've got a choice: lose all of your control over the leviathan, or just part of it."

Ardan took a deep breath and watched him appraisingly. "You don't have it with you."

Moon flicked his spines, though Ardan couldn't read that as a gesture of dismissal. "Of course not."

"The others have it," Rift said suddenly. "I've seen it."

Ardan gave Rift a slight nod of thanks. Still thoughtful, he said to Moon, "As you must have guessed, I wasn't able to open the sanctum. There is a wheel on the inside that operates the door, and whoever is in there was clever enough to find a way to jam it."

Moon was fairly certain that a queen and a mentor working together had had absolutely no difficulty finding a way to jam the mechanism. Especially since they would have felt no need to be careful with whatever materials were available inside the dome. He just said, "They'll open it for me."

Ardan lifted a brow. "And would your companions trade both the seed and the bridle for you?"

Moon showed all his teeth. "If you try that, they'll smash your bridle and scatter the pieces in the sea."

"Why should I believe you?" Ardan smiled thinly. "Perhaps you're too valuable to them. You are a consort. I know what that means."

Rift said, "No. He's like me, he was a solitary. His queen is the only one who wants him and she's trapped in the sanctum. They won't trade for him."

Moon flinched. It wasn't true; it was just Rift trying to help, melding truth with lies, which was apparently what he did best. It was just an accident that he had hit so close to the bone.

Ardan's brow furrowed. His sharp gaze hadn't missed Moon's reaction. He said, "You're certain?"

Rift had nothing in his voice but complete conviction. "They would never have sent a consort they cared about into your tower. Not even to save a colony tree seed."

Moon set his jaw, and tried to ignore the sinking sensation in his stomach. *They didn't send me, I sent myself.* Jade would never have agreed to the plan if she had been there to object. Somehow knowing that didn't help.

Ardan hesitated, his face hard. *He doesn't want to make the trade, but he can't see another way out,* Moon thought. *You hope he can't see another way out.*

Then a guard approached from out of the shadows in the direction of the mortuary's main entrance. He moved forward cautiously, saluted Ardan with a half bow, and said, "Magister, please."

Ardan said, through gritted teeth, "Excuse me a moment." He turned and moved back to the line of guards to talk to the man. They faced away, speaking in whispers, and not in Kedaic.

Quietly, in Raksuran, Moon asked Rift, "Can you understand them?"

Rift glanced down. "Yes, they're speaking Ilisai, a trader's language. He said Magister Lethen is at the gate with Magisters Giron and Soleden. They have all their guards with them, and they say they have firepowder."

"What's that?"

"A weapon. It makes a big burst of fire. The fishermen use it to keep the giant waterlings away." Rift listened a moment more. "The guard says that the people are gathering in this area, too. When they felt the leviathan jolt, someone ordered the traders to cast off and the fishing boats to be secured for a move, so everyone knows something is wrong."

"Good." Moon rippled his spines, trying to release the tension in his back. That explained why the guards had been in the passage. Ardan had known the other magisters would be trying to get inside, and if any of them knew about the smuggler's entrance, they might have enough magic of their own to get through his barrier.

Ardan turned away from the messenger. From his expression, none of this was welcome news. He said to Moon, "Very well. I'll return the seed in exchange for the bridle. If Rift will be good enough to go and get it now."

That hadn't been in Moon's plans. "After you let us go with the seed."

Ardan's expression was derisive. "I'm not a fool. Then you'd have both."

Moon bared his fangs. “I don’t want both.”

Ardan held out for a long moment, then took a sharp impatient breath. “Send Rift for the bridle. You and I will go and get the seed. We’ll make the exchange here.”

Moon controlled a frustrated hiss. He could continue to argue, but he didn’t want the other magisters to break this up anymore than Ardan did. He told Rift, “Go and get it.”

Rift flicked his spines in assent, threw an opaque look at Ardan, and bounded away toward the doorway to the tunnel.

Ardan started toward the dome and the guards hastily moved out of his way. Moon followed him, forcing himself not to twitch under the suspicious regard of a large group of hostile groundlings.

He took in a quiet breath and tasted the air. There was no hint of Stone or Esom, but then the air was thick with rot, the leviathan’s stench, and decaying preserved waterling. Using Esom’s concealment spell, the two of them should be working their way around the outer perimeter of the big chamber, as far away from the guardsmen and Ardan as possible.

Once they were past the bulk of the dead waterling, Moon could see the dome. Ardan hadn’t lied; it looked undisturbed, except for some new scratches and scuffs at the door seam where the guards must have tried to pry it open.

As they reached the dome, Ardan said easily, “Continue to speak in Kedaic, please. I wouldn’t want reason to doubt our arrangement.”

Moon didn’t argue. He stepped up to the door and tapped on it. “Jade, it’s me.” He couldn’t hear anything from inside, but after a long, fraught moment, something creaked in the wall and the door began to slide open. It stopped, leaving a gap only a pace or so wide. Jade stepped into the opening.

Moon realized that until that moment he hadn’t been certain that she and Flower were really still inside the dome, that this hadn’t been an elaborate ruse by Ardan. She was still in her winged form, her spines bristling. Moon heard muted exclamations from some of Ardan’s men. They sounded startled and uneasy, as if Jade was more formidable than they had expected. Jade kept her expression neutral, though her gaze flicked over Moon briefly, possibly looking for open wounds. Then, with a slight narrowing of her eyes, she regarded Ardan.

He said, “I had never expected to see a Raksuran queen in the flesh.”

Jade tilted her head inquiringly. “Have you seen many dead ones?”

Ardan smiled, acknowledging the hit. “I’ve seen the wall carvings.”

Moon said, “We’re giving him the thing that he needs to keep the leviathan from sinking, and he’s going to let us leave with the seed.”

“Is he.” Jade sounded unconvinced, but she lifted a hand.

Flower stepped into view behind Jade, and she held something tucked under her arm. It was a light brown object the size of a melon, with a ribbed outer shell. Flower said, “It was in a holder in the altar, or whatever it is, in here.” She peered past Jade at Ardan. “That’s him, is it?”

Ardan frowned at Flower. “I’m sorry. You’re not a Raksura, surely?” Apparently he couldn’t contain his curiosity even under these circumstances.

Flower’s brows quirked. This was probably not a question she had ever been asked before. “I’m an Arbora.”

Ardan didn’t look convinced. “You don’t resemble the carvings.”

That was possibly an attempt at a polite way of saying that the carvings showed Arbora to be stocky and heavily muscled, and not raw-boned thin and fragile. Flower said, dryly, “I’m old.”

Jade took Flower’s shoulder and moved her away from Ardan, putting Flower between herself and Moon. Ardan gave her a polite nod. He stepped back, and said, “Very well. We’ll go and make the exchange.”

Jade lifted a brow at Moon, but didn’t object. Ardan wasn’t stupid by any stretch of the imagination, but he was desperate, and Moon was fairly sure he would try something to keep the seed. He might believe now that the other Raksura wouldn’t trade the seed and the bridle for Moon, but that wouldn’t stop him from trying to make them trade for Jade’s release. But that wouldn’t happen until Ardan had his hands on the bridle. They started to follow the sorcerer back toward the tunnel entrance, where Rift would be waiting.

As they walked, Ardan said, “I was told that your consort is not accepted by your people, that he has the same disadvantage as Rift.”

Flower looked up, startled. Jade’s spines were already bristling and didn’t betray her reaction. She flicked a look at Moon, who couldn’t afford to do anything but stare back at her. He hoped she just played along and agreed, but some traitor part of him wanted her to

argue with Ardan even if it did wreck their plan. She said to Ardan, “I think it’s laughable to expect a groundling to understand our customs.”

Ardan wasn’t willing to let her avoid the issue. “I think anyone of feeling can recognize a despicable custom. And if you support it, why make an exception for your consort?”

Flower hissed quietly to herself. Jade’s spines rippled. She said, “You have your own share of despicable customs.”

Unperturbed, Ardan said, “I’ve offered Rift a refuge here. Your consort would be welcome as well.”

Jade’s claws flexed. Flower gave Moon a look of pure consternation, but Jade only said, “I think your refuge comes with a price.”

Then they were past the bulk of the dead waterling, and Ardan abruptly lost interest in the argument. He stopped, and said, grimly, “Speaking of Rift, it seems he has returned with company.”

Three Raksura waited on the steps below the tunnel entrance. From the colors of their scales, it was Rift, Balm, and Chime. Moon hoped the others waited past the doorway, just out of sight, and the men that Ardan had stationed there had been chased away down the tunnel.

“They don’t trust him,” Moon said. There were so many things that could still go wrong, he couldn’t count them. “Just like you don’t trust us.”

“True.” Ardan hesitated, his expression still, and Moon could practically see him turning over the decision whether to betray them or not. He didn’t let himself tense. They had the seed and a mostly clear shot to the tunnel entrance, and Stone and Esom should be nearby. His only worry was if Ardan could do some sort of magic before they all reached the tunnel. Then Ardan said, “Tell Rift to bring it—”

An explosion shook the chamber, sent a tremor through the paving. A shower of dust and rock chips rained down from above. Jade halfflared her wings. Moon ducked instinctively and threw a protective arm around Flower. She shifted to Arbora under his hand, crouching to shield the seed.

Someone shouted, “Magister, they’re coming, they broke through the wall—”

The firepowder, Moon realized. *The waterling weapon*. Ardan staggered to his feet, shouted at the guards. Moon looked back, trying

to see through the dust, and spotted Esom stumbling barely thirty paces away. Stone, still in groundling form, tackled him down, and rolled them both out of sight behind a pillar. Moon grimaced, stricken. The shock of the explosion must have made Esom lose control over his spell. The guards were going to see them any moment. He told Jade, "Go for the tunnel, go now! We'll distract him—"

Jade hissed agreement, grabbed Flower, and leapt for the tunnel.

Then suddenly the ground underfoot dipped and turned, threw Moon sideways as the paving lifted under them. He thought it was Ardan opening a passage down to the leviathan again, and snarled in fury. But Ardan staggered as the floor tilted, trying to stay on his feet. Water rushed in through the tunnel entrance, down the stairs, and bowled over Ardan's guards. Jade changed her direction in mid-leap and flared her wings. She whipped around to land on the nearest pillar, Flower and the seed still tucked under one arm. Chime, Balm, and Rift jumped up through the spray as the wave rolled across the floor.

The water had to be coming up the flooded street, obviously not hampered by the magical barrier over the door. But the floor still tilted down at a sharp incline. *The leviathan is lowering its head*, Moon realized in horror, *getting ready to go under...*

As the wave hit, Moon lunged forward, grabbed Ardan around the waist, and jumped down the incline to the side of the nearest pillar. Water washed over him, stale at first and then fresh. Moon shook Ardan and shouted, "What are you doing?"

"It's not me!" Ardan gritted out, his hands digging into Moon's arm. "It's the leviathan! Those fools, when they used the firepowder so close to its head, they must have woken it. Without the bridle it's free to do whatever it wants."

It sounded horribly likely. The leviathan had lowered its head immediately after the explosion. "Can you stop it?"

"I can try. Get me the bridle, take me to the sanctum, and I'll try!"

Moon looked around. Balm and Chime had joined Jade, perched on a pillar about a hundred paces away. They all stared this way, doubtless wondering what Moon was doing with Ardan. He couldn't see Rift... No, there he was, holding on to the corbelled ceiling high overhead. Moon bellowed, "Rift, come here!"

Rift hesitated, long enough for Moon to think about where he would have to put Ardan while he flew up to drag Rift out of the

ceiling, to wonder where Stone and Esom were. Water poured continuously in from the tunnel entrance, roared down the slope of the floor. Then Rift dropped down to the pillar and cupped his wings to land on it a few paces above Moon.

“Give him the bridle,” Moon said. “I’ve got to take him to the sanctum to try to stop this.”

Rift handed the bridle to Ardan, and said, “Good luck.”

Rift ducked away as Moon flared his wings and leapt for the next pillar. The sloped stone surface made for a difficult landing, and his claws slipped. He slid down a few paces before he caught hold of the carving. Ardan grunted in alarm, but didn’t struggle or panic. Moon pushed off again, more carefully this time, and crossed the room in long bounds. Halfway across, Chime caught up and landed above him on a slanting pillar. He said breathlessly, “Jade says to hurry up and do whatever it is you’re doing.”

Moon didn’t need to be told that. He leapt into the air again. He finally splashed down beside the sanctum’s open doorway. A moment later Chime landed atop the dome. Water poured down the slope of the floor, most of it flowing past the angled doorway, so the sanctum wasn’t flooded yet. He set Ardan on his feet. The Magister staggered, caught the wall to steady himself, and said, “Thank you. You can send your friend for the seed.”

Moon wasn’t buying that. “You said you could do it with the bridle. It’s a little late to change your story.” The man was as bad as Rift. Another wave washed down and sloshed partly into the sanctum. Ardan smiled tightly. “It was worth a try.” He pulled himself inside and staggered across to the plinth.

Moon climbed the side of the dome, up to where Chime crouched. The big room was even darker; the vapor-light stands in the lower part of the chamber had been swamped. Though it didn’t douse them, they didn’t put out much light under water. “Did you see Stone and Esom?”

Chime watched the swirling water below. A drowned groundling floated by, one of the blue-pearl guards. Chime grimaced. “No, where were they?”

“Behind a pillar, not far from the tunnel entrance.” Moon squinted to see through the shadows. “Esom lost the spell when the firepowder went off. They should have—”

A high-pitched roar echoed across the chamber. “Uh oh,” Chime said, nervously. “Now what?”

It came from the direction of the hole in the floor, the one Ardan had made above the leviathan's blowhole. Moon had a bad feeling about that. "I hope that's not what I think it is. Come on." Moon jumped off the dome and headed toward the sound.

As they made their way from pillar to pillar, Moon saw Stone first, in the big dark shape of his Raksuran form. He was at the edge of the jagged opening in the floor, and struggled with something. Then they reached a pillar overlooking it, and the scene made Chime gasp in horror. "I thought we were done with these things!"

Big beetle-like parasites climbed up through the opening from below. The creatures had armor, spines around their mouths, big fangs. They must be coming up out of the area around the leviathan's blowhole, driven by the water. Stone dodged around, slapped them back down into the opening.

"How long can he keep that up?" Chime wondered.

Not long enough, Moon thought, sick. At least Stone didn't have to fight in water; it was all pooling down towards the other end of the chamber. The only other advantage seemed to be that the creatures only came up on one side of the opening, the side that was mostly in shadow, the side furthest away from the nearest vapor-light.

"I've got an idea. Light, they must hate light—"

Chime caught on immediately. "We get the lights, dump them down the opening—"

"Come on!"

They went back, unhooked the metal vapor-light chambers from the tops of the nearest poles, carried them to the opening, and flung them down into it. The parasites shied away from the light, shrieking in dismay, and proving the theory correct.

Fortunately, the big chamber had a lot of vapor-lights, and Ardan's men must have lit more when they arrived. Moon's world narrowed down to finding, carrying, passing Chime, throwing, and dodging the flailing claws of the parasites. Balm came to help, and Moon saw Rift at one point, carrying a lamp. He was glad Jade had stayed to guard Flower, and almost wished Balm had remained with her. He wasn't counting Ardan out of this game yet.

The tide of parasites slowed, then stopped, and Stone clung panting to the sloping floor. Then abruptly the entire chamber rolled.

The pillar Moon had perched on suddenly changed from a slanted surface to a vertical one, and he slipped off and landed badly. A foulsmelling wave washed over him as the water that had collected at

the other end of the chamber flowed back this way.

Nearby, Stone abruptly shifted back to groundling. Still sprawled on the floor, he demanded, "What was that?"

"The leviathan lifted its head," Moon explained. Air thundered through the blowhole again as the creature expelled a breath, and they all hastily retreated from the edge of the opening.

"The floor's still moving," Balm said, stumbling a little as she joined them. "No, wait, the whole thing is moving."

"Ardan must be sending the leviathan somewhere," Moon said. "I gave him the bridle so he could stop it from going underwater."

"I thought he couldn't tell it where to go without the seed," Chime said.

They all stared at each other, stricken. Stone dropped his head into his hands, and muttered, "Not again."

"No, it can't be." Moon shook his head and dismissed the momentary fear. "He couldn't have gotten back across the mortuary on his own, let alone gotten the seed from Flower and Jade."

Stone said grimly, "I'll make sure. And I've got to get Esom. I left him around here somewhere." He jerked his head at Moon. "You three find out where Ardan's sent this thing."

Moon turned back for the sanctum with Balm and Chime, making slower progress through the big chamber now that it was in almost complete darkness. Most of the vapor-lights were down below on the leviathan's skin, lighting the area around the blowhole.

The sanctum's door was still open, and light shone out of it. They dropped silently to the floor about twenty paces away. Moon motioned for Balm and Chime to hang back. He went forward slowly, and eased up to the doorway to look inside.

Moon hissed, startled. *Wasn't expecting this.*

Ardan lay curled on the floor near the plinth. His eyes stared in blank surprise, and he still held the bridle in one hand, his fingers clutched around it. Moon stepped closer and knelt, touched the body lightly, then moved the head. Blood pooled on the floor beneath it. He thought Ardan had been hit from behind, cracked with force on the lower part of the skull, below the protective crown of bone and pearl. The angle was wrong for a fall. He might have somehow struck the edge of the plinth, but he had died facing it.

Worry about it later, Moon thought. On impulse he took the bridle, gently freeing it from Ardan's nerveless fingers, and then fled the

sanctum.

Chapter Seventeen

With the leviathan mostly level again, the water had drained out of the tunnel, so they were able to escape the mortuary that way. But the passage out to the flooded street was now completely under water. They would have to make their way out through the underground.

They found the others waiting for them on the buttress below the edilvine tunnel opening, wet but otherwise unhurt. There was some water below on the leviathan's hide, but not much, and it rapidly drained away.

There was a general expression of relief as Jade and then Flower dropped out of the tunnel. Then River, his spines and wings still dripping from the flood, demanded, "Did you get the—"

Flower held up the seed. That shut everyone up. They all gathered around and studied it reverently.

"It's not hurt?" Vine asked, and elbowed Root aside to get a better look. "The groundlings didn't ruin it?"

Flower tucked it securely under her arm and patted it fondly. "It's fine."

"But now what?" Still worried, Floret looked at Jade. "Is the sorcerer going to come after us for it? How do we get away from here?" "Ardan's dead," Moon said. He had told the others briefly on the way out, but he hadn't gone into detail. He had his suspicions, he just wasn't sure what to do about them yet.

There were murmurs of relief. Esom must have already told Karsis, because the two groundlings stood further down the buttress, talking excitedly in their own language. Jade said, "We still need a way off the leviathan." Watching Esom and Karsis carefully, she stepped past the others to ask them, "You have a boat. Would you be willing to share it with us?"

Esom said, "If we go back to Ardan's tower first." His clothes and hair dripped from the flood, and he had taken off his cracked spectacles.

"Our people are still trapped there. With Ardan and his guards gone, we can free them. But only if we hurry and get there before the

other magisters try to take it over.”

“If you help us, we can all get away,” Karsis added anxiously. “Our ship can take you all the way back to the forest coast, if you need it to.” Jade lifted a brow at Moon. In Raksuran, she said, “It’s a fair offer.” He nodded, and answered her in the same language, “They’ve helped us so far. And realistically, I don’t know if we could figure out how their ship works without their help.” And he didn’t want to strand them here. From what they had said, an ordinary boat wouldn’t be able to get

them back through the dangerous waters surrounding their homeland.

He switched to Kedaic to ask Esom, “What about Ardan’s spells, the warden-creatures, the barrier?”

“Those would have died with him,” Esom said. Then he grimaced uncertainly and added, “That’s how it generally works.”

Jade looked at Flower, who shrugged, then at Rift. She asked him, “Is that true?”

Rift seemed startled to be consulted. He said, “I don’t know.” Moon watched Esom, who looked tired and earnest. He could be lying but... *But it would be stupid to lie about this*, Moon thought. And he had never had the image of Esom as a very good liar, despite the fact that he had concealed his abilities from Ardan. He exchanged a look with

Jade, who hissed out a breath. She said, “Then we’ll go to the tower.”



They traveled through the dimly-lit underground, back to the well in the city foundations that led up into the lower level of Ardan’s tower. Moon led them up through the lichen-illuminated passage, back to the panel that opened into the first floor of the exhibit hall. It had been sealed again, and Esom stepped forward to whisper, “Wait, let me make sure...”

“I thought he said the magics would all be gone,” Root muttered in the back.

Moon snarled absently. If Esom was wrong about the tower being undefended, he didn’t know how they were going to free Negal and the other groundlings. Esom frowned, touched the door lightly, then ran his hand over it. Relieved, he said, “There was something here, I can feel the resonance, but it’s gone now.” He turned to Moon. “Ardan

must have been hoping to catch us if we tried to come back this way.”

“Good.” Moon stepped past him to push on the door and felt it move just a little, enough to tell him there had been no attempt made to block it off from the other side.

“Wait.” Jade turned to face the others. Stone had had to shift back to groundling to fit through the last part of the passage. Everyone looked exhausted, wet, and worried, including the groundlings. She said, “Don’t kill anyone. We don’t want a war with these people.”

“They keep trying to kill us,” Drift protested.

“Because Ardan ordered them to,” Moon said impatiently. “He’s dead, and we can’t fight every groundling in this city. If they think we’re out to slaughter them, they’ll all band together against us.”

“And because I said so,” Jade added, and cuffed Drift in the head. She clearly wasn’t in any mood to put up with an argument. She nodded to Moon, and he and Vine pushed the panel out and lifted it away, letting in a spill of brighter light from the corridor. Moon was the first one out.

Moon took a deep breath of air only lightly tinged with the leviathan’s stench. After the underground and the mortuary, the polished floors and bright vapor-lights were a relief.

He led the way around and out from under the stairwell, to the main room. It seemed even bigger without the giant waterling, with the chains that had supported it hanging empty. The outer door was securely locked and barred, but there were no guards and no sound of movement anywhere. Most if not all of them must have gone with Ardan. Presumably the survivors would be looking for new jobs and wouldn’t be returning here.

“It feels empty,” Rift said, his voice hushed. “But the servants must still be here.”

Moon tasted the air. He caught only the scents of decay from the upper exhibit hall and the traces left behind of the giant waterling. “Somebody would have had to open the doors for Ardan and the others when they came back.”

Jade ordered, “Search the place, chase out any of Ardan’s people left behind, and find the prisoners.”

Leaving Jade and Chime behind to guard Flower and the seed, and Stone to watch the outside door, they all spread out to search the place floor by floor.

Moon followed the stairs up through the tower and opened every door he came to, breaking the locks if necessary. Vine flushed out the first frightened servant, and they quickly organized a system for chasing them out to the stairwell where Song or Root waited to make sure they ran all the way down and out the front door, where Stone made certain they left. They didn't run into anyone who was armed; Ardan must have taken all his guards with him to the mortuary.

They were all hungry and drooping with exhaustion. The younger warriors were having difficulty keeping up, and Karsis had to tow Esom up the stairs. On the third floor above the exhibit halls they passed a foyer with a running fountain. Moon stepped into it just long enough to put his head under the spray and wash the last residue of the leviathan off his scales. It helped revive him a little. It had been a long time without sleep or real food, and he didn't know how much longer he and the others could last.

They were in the upper levels of the tower, where the public rooms were, exploring a servants' area near a second set of kitchens, when Balm stumbled on a heavily locked door that seemed to lead to a separate section of the level. They forced open the door to find a corridor with doors not unlike the guest quarters—except these doors had no open transoms to allow in light and air, and all had locks on the outside. "This could be it," Esom breathed. He ran to the first door and pounded on it, shouting, "Negal? Orlis?"

Karsis took the other side of the corridor, pounding on each door. Midway down, someone inside shouted an incomprehensible answer and pounded back.

"It's them!" Karsis fumbled at the lock as Esom ran to join her.

Balm glanced at Moon, got a nod, and went to help them. She broke the lock off the handle and ripped the door open.

Negal stepped out first, then stopped, astonished. He stared from Esom to Balm, Moon, and past them at Vine, who looked in from the foyer. Orlis and six other men crowded behind him. They were all a similar type of groundling, with dark hair and brown skin, dressed in worn clothes, with the thin, pinched look of people who had been away from the sun and fresh air for a long time. Smiling with relief, Negal said to Esom, "I take it the situation has changed drastically?"

Esom explained, "Ardan is dead, and we have an alliance with them, now." He gestured vaguely toward Moon and the others. "Of course, most of the population of the island probably wants to kill us —"

Karsis cried, "But we're alive and finally free!" She hugged Negal,

overcome with emotion, and Moon and Balm hastily withdrew to the foyer. "Stay with them. Keep an eye on them," Moon told Balm, speaking in Raksuran to avoid any awkwardness. "Make sure the others are as willing to be friendly as Karsis and Esom. And keep Rift away from them."

Balm nodded understanding, and glanced back at the groundlings. "I will. Especially the part about Rift."

Moon left her with them, took Vine, and continued the search.

In a stairwell foyer two levels up, they ran back into Floret and Song.

"I found some groundlings hiding in these rooms," Floret said. "A woman, and some baby groundlings. The babies screamed when they saw me. When I shifted, they just screamed again." Looking embarrassed, she admitted, "It's a little upsetting. I don't want to scare them anymore."

She, Song, and Vine all stared expectantly at Moon. Song said, encouragingly, "You know how to talk to groundlings."

Moon sighed. Warriors weren't fertile and presumably had little experience with children. Except to play with them occasionally, and hand them back to the teachers when the babies got tired or hungry. "Wait out here. Stay back away from the door."

Moon went into the anteroom. The statues carved into the walls were female, the first ones he could remember seeing here, draped with graceful swaths of fabric and, unlike the male statues, smiling faintly. He shifted to groundling, and staggered, nearly going to his knees. Every cut and bruise, every sore and strained muscle, was suddenly magnified

a hundredfold. He groaned, managed to straighten up, and walked into the suite.

It was furnished even more finely than the other private rooms Moon had seen, with thick carpets and heavy hangings on the walls in patterns of soft colors. The wooden furniture was elegantly carved and set with polished mother-of-pearl, the vapor-lamps shaped into fanciful fish and seabirds. It smelled of the perfumes the wealthy groundlings here wore, cloying false-flowery scents, combined with a musk of fear. Moon heard muffled weeping and followed it back through the rooms

to a bedchamber. A young blue-pearl woman wrapped in a rich robe was huddled on the floor between the heavily draped bed and a carved chest, with four blue-pearl children of varying ages, all

sniffing in terror. There was an elderly blue-pearl man and a woman huddled in with them, both dressed like servants.

Moon said to the young woman, “You have to leave now. Do you have somewhere to go? Your family’s house, maybe?”

She stared at him in confusion, the light blue skin around her eyes bruised with weeping. But some of the panic in her face subsided. If she had met Rift, she had to know Raksura could look like groundlings, but maybe she was only seeing Moon as a slender young man in dark clothing, and not a potential monster. Or maybe what he had said was so far from her worst fear that it had shocked her back to her senses. She said, hesitantly, “May I take anything?”

“Sure.” Moon figured she would probably need money. She glanced at the chest and Moon saw jewelry spilled across the top, silver chains with polished gemstones. He said, “Take all that.”

Moon waited while the woman and the two servants hurriedly swept the jewelry into a bag and collected clothing and a few other possessions. The activity seemed to calm them down, and he ended up helping one of the children extract a cloth doll from under the bed. He led them out to the foyer, where the woman flinched at the sight of the lurking Raksura, who all fled up the stairwell when Moon grimaced at them.

He shepherded the groundlings down the stairs, through the lower exhibit hall. Stone, in his groundling form, was standing beside the passage to the outer doors. The adults avoided looking at him, as if they were afraid to see some outward sign of what he was. But the children stared curiously, and Stone quirked a smile at them as they passed.

Moon pushed the outside door open for them. The sun was shining, the miasma that usually hung over the leviathan torn away when the creature had jolted into motion. The plaza and the surrounding walkways were empty, though somewhat protected from the rush of wind. The woman blinked at the daylight as if she had never expected to see it again. Moon said, “Will you be all right?”

“It’s not far,” she said, automatically. Then she focused on him, her eyes intent. “Thank you.”

He shrugged uneasily. “It wasn’t your fault.”

She nodded tightly, then turned away. He watched the little group walk away across the plaza and take a path toward the nearest cluster of towers.

Moon went back inside, and helped Stone pull the door shut and

lever the locks and bars into place again.

As they came back out into the exhibit hall, Jade leapt down from the gallery. She caught Moon by the shoulders, her expression worried and preoccupied. "Moon, you should rest. We'll need you when the groundlings are ready to talk. We can't try to get to the harbor until after nightfall, anyway."

That was true. They needed to make a plan to reach the harbor and steal back Negal's flying boat. Moon considered it, wavering back and forth, then thought, *Why not?* He might as well give in to his consort's privilege to rest while everybody else was working. "All right."

Jade pointed him toward the back corridor of the tower. "Go back there. Flower is resting and Chime's watching over her."

Moon found his way toward the back of the first floor of the tower, to what must be the servants' and guards' quarters. A short stair led up to a big common room. There were thin rugs, not nearly as nice as the ones upstairs, padded benches, and a few stray floor cushions. A couple of narrow corridors and several small rooms opened off it. He looked into the first room to see Flower lying on the bed with Chime sitting beside her. She was in groundling form, curled around a pillow with the seed tucked under her arm; she looked tiny and almost withered. "Is she all right?" Moon whispered. She looked terrible.

Chime glanced up, his expression uneasy. "I don't know. She's just so tired. Rift is showing Root where the food is kept. I was going to try to get her to eat."

Without moving, Flower hissed, "Both of you, hush."

Moon hastily backed away. He went to one of the padded benches in the common room and sat down, then lay down for a moment to rest his eyes.

He wasn't aware of falling asleep, though he was dimly aware of the others coming and going through the room, or lying down to sleep on the floor. He smelled dried fish at one point, but was too tired to wake and look for his share. Then he woke abruptly, with Song leaning over him. She was in her groundling form, and her expression was anxious and a little frightened. "Moon. Flower says it's time."

Moon blinked, having trouble dragging himself out of sleep. "Time for what?"

Song seemed startled to be asked. "She's dying."

That jolted him fully awake. He sat up, pushed to his feet, and

followed Song into the bed chamber.

Flower still lay on the bed, propped up on some cushions. Her eyes were closed, and her skin looked almost translucent under the vapor-light. Jade sat beside her, in her Arbora form, her spines twitching anxiously. Stone stood nearby, the seed absently tucked under one arm. Chime sat on the floor by the head of the bed, hunched in misery. The other warriors were gathered around in groundling form, all grim and sad.

Jade glanced up as Moon came in. Keeping her voice low, she said, "Sorry. I would have sent for you sooner, but she wasn't sure until just now." She looked around, taking stock of who was here. "Root, Vine is guarding the outer door. Go take his place so he can have a chance to see her. Hurry."

As Root darted out of the room, Stone sat down on the bed. He touched Flower's limp hand, but she didn't stir.

"What's wrong?" Moon asked. Nobody seemed to be doing anything. "What happened to her?"

Balm said softly, "Nothing. It's her age, it's caught up with her."

Moon couldn't believe that they were just standing here. It had to be some stupid Raksuran custom, maybe because there was no other mentor to help her. Chime might have an ability to sense things about the leviathan and Ardan's magic, but he couldn't use mentor skills to heal anymore. Moon said, "Karsis is a healer. Let me get her."

With a trace of impatience, Jade said, "Moon, it's no use. It's Flower's time."

Moon bit back his first angry response. He had to convince them that a groundling healer would be better than nothing, and losing his temper wouldn't help. "It doesn't have to be."

Flower spoke, her voice a bare whisper, "Moon doesn't know."

Jade frowned and shook her head slightly, not understanding. Chime looked up at Moon then, blinking, startled. The other warriors stared at him, confused. Stone winced, but didn't look away from Flower. Frustrated, Moon said, "Know what?"

Chime said, slowly, "She's been dying. We've known for most of the turn. Since before you came."

Stunned, Moon looked around at the others. It was in all their expressions. This hadn't been a surprise to anyone but him. He sank down on the end of the bed. "How did you know?"

"When her skin and her scales lost all their color, it's the sign. It

means your time is coming...” Jade said, then hissed in realization. “But you didn’t know that.”

Moon couldn’t answer. Of course he hadn’t known. Before Indigo Cloud, all the Raksura he had known had died by being torn apart by Tath, not from old age.

Nobody else said anything, not even River or Drift, as if the subject was too sensitive. Chime twitched restlessly, folded his arms. He said, “She should have died at home.”

Stone made a softly derisive sound. “If she hadn’t come with us, we wouldn’t have a home.”

In a dry rasp, still without opening her eyes, Flower added, “And don’t you forget it. Now, each of you come and talk to me.”

Everyone took turns to sit by Flower and speak to her one last time. When Stone prodded Moon to take his turn, he held her hand, the skin and bones as dry and delicate as old parchment. She said, “Don’t give up. Promise me you won’t give up on us.”

He wasn’t sure if she was having an augury, or if she had just noticed his uncertainty, or both. He said automatically, “I promise.”

It didn’t take long after that, as if she had only been holding on long enough to say goodbye. Vine left, to go back to guarding the first floor. Moon and the others stayed, as Flower’s breathing grew softer and slower and more shallow, until finally, it stopped altogether.

Moon turned away, went blindly through the common room, out into the corridor. He couldn’t watch the others’ grief; it felt private. They had known Flower all their lives, she had held them when they were fledglings. In Stone’s case, he must have watched her grow up. Moon’s feelings couldn’t compare to that.

When he walked into the exhibit hall, he saw Negal and Esom at the bottom of the stairs with three other groundlings from their crew. Esom looked bleary and half-awake, as if he had been dragged out to talk to the dangerous Raksura when he would rather be sleeping. He called, “Moon, what’s going on? Is there a plan yet for how we’re going to—”

“Flower died,” Moon said.

Taken aback, Esom stared. “Oh. I’m— I’m sorry. I didn’t realize she was injured.”

Moon shook his head; he couldn’t explain now. “Just give us a little time.” Without waiting for an answer, he shifted and leapt up to the gallery, ignoring the startled exclamations from the other

groundlings.

He paced the hall there, past the decaying Tath and the other creatures, half-listening as Esom persuaded Negal and the others to go back upstairs to wait. It was hard to believe that it had really happened, that Flower was really gone. He had never seen anyone die from old age before. It had been so quiet.

Moon ended up standing in the cubby with the dead sea kingdom woman. He wondered what would happen to her when someone else took over the tower, what they would do with her body, if there were any other imprisoned spirits here like the waterling, or if Ardan's death had released them. After a time he heard movement and looked up to see Jade, moving slowly down the hall, looking at Ardan's collection. She was in her Arbora form, her spines flattened in dejection.

When she reached the cubby, he shifted back to groundling, and said, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, just..." Jade rubbed her temple and frowned down at the sealing's body. "I have to get used to the idea that she's gone." She looked up at him, wincing apologetically. "Moon, I'm sorry. I never thought that you didn't know."

He shook his head. He didn't want her to apologize to him for something that wasn't anyone's fault. "She didn't tell me." Moon had asked Flower if Raksura were born live or in eggs; she had to have realized he didn't know how they died of old age, either.

"Maybe she wanted someone to talk to who didn't know." Jade touched a curl of the sealing's hair, then drew her hand back, as if she had just realized it was a real body and not a very realistic statue. "When the change first happens to someone, it's a shock. After a while, you get used to it. No one talks about it, but you don't forget."

No one had talked about it at Emerald Twilight, but they had seen Flower and surely realized she was dying. Moon wondered if that was why Ice had been inclined to let the mentors help them, for Flower's sake. *Ice*, he thought suddenly. *Her scales are nearly white.* Queens lived longer than Arbora, but she must be nearing the end of her life. He wondered who would replace her, if it would be Tempest or someone else, if Shadow would retain his influence or be just another older consort. He would have to ask Jade and Stone. Their alliance with Emerald Twilight might be even more tenuous than it had seemed. *Worry about that later, he told himself. We have to get back home first.*

Moon suddenly didn't want to stand here with the dead any more. He took Jade's wrist, absently rubbed his thumb over the softer scales

on the back of her hand. “We need to talk to Negal about their ship, how we can get to it.”

Jade took a deep breath. “You’re right. We’ll do that now.”

□ They went back to the servants’ common room. Balm, Chime, and Stone were still in the bedchamber with Flower, but the others sat around on the floor and the couches. Everyone looked weary and sad. Rift was back against the far wall, separated from the others, still wary. Floret made an effort to perk up, and said, “What are we doing now?”

“We’re going to get off this damn leviathan.” Jade settled on one of the cushioned benches and pulled Moon down next to her. She told Song, “Go find the groundlings. Ask them to come here.”

Song hurried away, and a short time later they heard the groundlings in the corridor. Drift shifted to Raksura. River hissed at him before Jade or Moon could, and Drift immediately shifted back. He said, “Sorry, I was startled.” He actually sounded sorry. Moon suspected the good behavior was only going to last until the shock over Flower’s death faded.

Song came in, followed by Esom, Karsis, Negal, and Orlis, then one of the men who had been imprisoned in the tower. He was about Negal’s size, but his brown skin was more lined around the eyes, his hair more sprinkled with gray. Orlis smelled of nervous fear, and the new man looked as grim as if he was already resigned to some kind of betrayal. His expression tightened even more when he saw Rift.

Karsis stepped forward, cleared her throat, and said, “I believe you don’t know our leader, Negal, our second assistant deviser Orlis, and Captain Damison. This is Jade, sister queen of the Indigo Cloud Court, and her consort Moon.”

Moon caught Song giving Karsis a slight nod of approval. Taking her diplomatic duties as a female warrior seriously, she must have quickly informed Karsis of the proper way to greet Jade.

Negal inclined his head politely. “I’m sorry to have to make your acquaintance under such unpleasant circumstances. And I wish to apologize to you for our part in the theft of your property. Our assistance to Magister Ardan was involuntary, but I know it has put your court in a dangerous position.”

It was the right thing to say. Moon could feel Jade’s tension uncoiling. She said, “I’m willing to believe that. Karsis and Esom have said that you want an alliance with us, that together we can use your flying ship to escape this place. Do they speak for you?”

Negal glanced at Esom and Karsis, and smiled slightly. "In this case, yes." Song pushed a couple of stools forward and indicated that the groundlings should sit down. Negal and the others moved to take seats, but Captain Damison said, "What about him? Rift."

Behind them, Rift stirred, started to stand. Moon turned his head enough to pin him with a look. Rift froze, and sunk back to the floor. Jade didn't even bother to flick a spine in Rift's direction. Her eyes on Damison, she said, "He isn't your concern."

"That problem appears to be sorted," Esom said to Damison. He pushed a stool at him and said pointedly, "Now sit down."

Damison hesitated, still watching Rift with deadly intensity. Then Stone came out of the back room. He stopped, glanced over the groundlings noncommittally, then came around to sit on the floor near Jade's feet. He said, in Raksuran, "Chime is taking it hard."

Moon started to get up. Jade caught his arm and gently stopped him. "Balm is with him."

Moon settled back, reluctantly. Esom looked from Stone to Jade. "Is Chime all right?" he asked, concern evident in his voice. Chime's name would have been the only word he could understand in the Raksuran exchange.

Karsis added, "If he's injured, perhaps I could help?"

Jade shook her head. "He was close to Flower; she taught him, when he was a mentor."

"Oh, I see. Of course," Esom said, though it was clear he didn't really understand, except that Chime had been Flower's student. Esom sat back, but the moment seemed to ease the tension. Damison glanced around uncomfortably, then finally took a seat.

Negal leaned forward and clasped his hands on his knee. "As you proposed, the best way to escape this city is on our ship, the *Klodifore*. If we cooperate, we should be able to reach the harbor and secure it. As long as the city authorities don't realize that we're working together, they shouldn't suspect that retrieving the ship is our goal." He spread his hands. "Then we can take you east, all the way to the forest coast if need be, before we head back to our own home."

Jade asked, "Can you launch the ship while the leviathan is still moving?"

Esom exchanged a look with Orlis. "It won't be easy, but I'm certainly willing to try."

"If I never see this creature again it will be too soon," Orlis

agreed. "I'll risk anything to get off it."

Then Root ducked into the doorway, so abruptly the groundlings flinched. He said, "A groundling banged on the outside door and said Magister Lethen wants to talk!"

Jade frowned and asked Moon, "Do you know who that is?"

"Yes." He pushed himself upright. "He was outside the mortuary with the other magisters. I don't think he and Ardan were friends."

"They weren't," Negal said, frowning. "They were bitter rivals."

Jade tapped her claws on the couch cushion, thinking. "How strong is his magic?"

"He certainly couldn't seem to do anything about Ardan," Negal told her. "I think he would have if he could." He hesitated. "Will you speak to him?"

Jade nodded reluctantly. "We'd better. Just to stall him, if nothing else." She told Negal, "You come to the hall and listen, but don't let him see you."



Out in the exhibit hall, Jade had Negal stand just out of sight to one side of the entrance passage, so he could listen to the conversation. Stone stood just out of sight to the other side, in case it wasn't a conversation that Lethen had in mind. Vine, Floret, River, and Drift were also clinging to the wall above the passage. The others, with Negal's crew, were poised to retreat into the underground if they had to.

Jade put her hand on the door bar and said, "Ready?"

"Probably," Moon told her. If Lethen had magic like Ardan's, all their preparations meant nothing. But if Lethen had magic like Ardan's, Moon was betting he wouldn't have had to use the firepowder to get into the mortuary.

Jade lifted the bar and pulled the door open.

Lethen stood just outside. He was as Moon remembered him from the evening in the tower: a richly-dressed, ruinously old blue-pearl man. His gaze went to Jade first. He stared at her with guarded curiosity. Then he looked at Moon and frowned, startled. "You. The trader." His expression turned saturnine. "You're one of them. Did Ardan know?"

There was no reason not to admit it now. "Yes."

Lethen swore. "The fool."

Jade said sharply, "He attacked us. He came to our colony while we were gone and stole from us."

"I'm not disputing that." Lethen folded his gnarled hands over the head of his cane. "He claimed to need artifacts of arcane power to keep the leviathan from sinking. Since we're all still alive, I assume that wasn't true."

Moon didn't see any reason not to admit that, too. "No. All he needed was the bridle."

"Then I'm a fool as well, for I believed him." Lethen eyed them a moment. "Do you know where this creature is taking us?"

"No."

Lethen said, "I do. We're headed northeast, toward Emriat-terrene."

Jade flicked a look at Moon. He said, "It's going home." That was the place in the story Rith had told them, the home of the sorcerers who had originally built the city atop the leviathan.

"A logical assumption," Lethen admitted. "It's returning to its original position." He added, "I'm a very old man. Unlike Ardan, I have all the wealth and temporal power I'm likely to ever need, and I have no wish to live on something that moves, either at someone's direction or its own random whim."

Moon said, "You want the bridle."

Lethen inclined his head. "The question is, what do you want?"

Moon exchanged a look with Jade. She said, "We want the flying boat."

Lethen frowned. "The what?"

"The metal ship in the harbor, the one that Ardan stole from the foreign explorers." Jade hesitated. "It's still there, isn't it?"

"I believe so. The harbormaster was charged with lifting it out of the water with the fishing fleet. I assume he still did his job." Lethen regarded her with open skepticism. "That's all you want?"

"Yes," Moon told him. "We'll give you the bridle, if you let us leave, with the explorers, on that boat."

Jade said, "That's not all. In Ardan's collection, there's a wooden container, an urn—"

Lethen waved that away. "My dear, take anything from this tower that you want. You can strip the place down to the foundations if you like. I've spoken with Ardan's wife. She makes no claim on his

property.” His sharp gaze switched back to Moon. “She told me that you allowed her to leave with her children and personal servants. It was the reason I thought it might be possible to negotiate with you.”

“We don’t kill unless we’re provoked,” Jade said. It wasn’t quite a threat.

Lethen’s expression was sardonic. “I’ll keep that in mind. I don’t supposed you’d like to give me the bridle now.”

Hardly, Moon thought. “At the harbor, by the boat.”

“I’ll be waiting.” He gave them an ironic nod and turned away. They watched him hobble briskly across the square.

As they closed the door behind him, Jade said, “Do you think we can trust him?”

“No. But I think he wants the bridle, and he doesn’t care about us.”

Negal stepped into the passage. “I agree. And I think we should leave, now, before he changes his mind.”

Nobody wanted to argue with that.

Chapter Eighteen

Moon stepped into the room where Flower had died. The vaporlights were dimming, issuing only a little glowing mist, and the room was thick with shadows. Her body still lay on the bed, wrapped in silky sheets. It made an absurdly small bundle. He made himself look away, to the corner where Balm and Chime sat.

Chime huddled half in Balm's lap, and she stroked his hair. Moon went to kneel beside them and put a hand on Chime's back. "We have to leave. We're going to the flying ship in the harbor."

Balm lifted her brows. "Now? Isn't it still daylight?"

"We have a deal with the magister who's taking Ardan's place." At her expression, he added, "I know, but we're hoping this one works out better."

Chime took a sharp breath and sat up. He looked sick, exhausted. "What about her body? Do we have to leave her here? We should hide her, so they don't—"

"No, we're going to take her." Jade had decided to take the queen's funerary urn from Ardan's collection for the purpose. It was big enough to hold a small Arbora body, once the current occupant was removed. Moon was going to let Stone handle that part.

"Oh." Chime nodded, swallowed, and made to get up.

The groundlings hadn't had many personal possessions with them, just clothing and a few things Ardan had allowed them to bring from their ship. They went up to quickly gather what they needed, and the Raksura spent the time raiding the tower's kitchens and food stores, taking everything that could be easily transported and stuffed into bags. "There's no meat," Drift complained at one point as he turned out the contents of a cabinet.

"You'll eat bread and dried fish and like it," Balm told him, in the tone of someone on her last nerve.

Once that was done, both groups assembled in the exhibit hall, in the passage to the outer door. Moon had wondered if Negal's people would take the opportunity to loot Ardan's belongings, as compensation for their imprisonment. It didn't look like they had; the

packs they carried were all stuffed with bags from the tower's dry food stores. Maybe they didn't want any reminders, or maybe their isolated land valued different things. All Negal had was a shoulder bag stuffed with paper, perhaps writing done while he was trapped here.

"You haven't changed your mind?" Jade asked Negal. She had the seed, carefully wrapped in Flower's old pack, securely fastened between her wing join and her shoulder. Vine, the largest male warrior, had shouldered the big pack that contained the urn. It was a heavy burden, more than four paces tall and two wide, but Stone was going to be too occupied to carry it.

Negal glanced back at the others. All of them except Karsis and Esom watched the Raksura with suspicion. They kept looking at Rift and then looking away. Negal had said they wouldn't want to be carried through the air, an attitude that Moon could understand given their experiences with Rift. But that wasn't going to make getting to the port any safer. "Unfortunately not," Negal said, a little wryly. "Though we are certain it would be a unique experience."

"I hope your walk to the harbor doesn't turn out to be a unique experience," Jade said, and nodded for Stone to go ahead.

Stone pushed open the doors and stepped out into the daylight. He shifted and his dark form blocked the doorway for a heartbeat. There was a chorus of gasps and startled flinches from the groundlings who hadn't seen him before. Then he sprang into the air so fast he seemed to vanish.

Moon followed Jade to the doorway, the warriors behind them. The plaza looked empty from here, but Stone circled overhead to scan for ambushes or hidden traps. He tipped a wing to show it was clear.

Turning back to Negal, Jade said, "Follow us. We'll make certain your route is safe."

Negal gripped his bag and said, "We will."

Jade stepped out and leapt into flight; Moon and the warriors followed her. As soon as they were above the surrounding buildings, the wind hit them like a hammer. The warriors dropped back low over the rooftops, but Moon fought it, tried to ride it without being slammed into anything, until he caught Jade's signal. Then he angled off and made for the harbor.

Jade and the others would stay with the groundlings, following them roof to roof to make sure they weren't attacked on the way through the city. They had decided that Moon and Stone would fly ahead to the ship to see if there were guards or magisters lurking

aboard.

Buffeted by the wind, Moon saw mostly empty streets below, with only a few moving figures. He had to circle around to hit the harbor, but saw it was almost deserted too, the big slips for the trading vessels empty, the small fishing boats swinging in their raised cradles. The *Klodifore* was still there, tied to its pier, suspended several paces above the water. The leviathan's motion was causing the water in the harbor to churn, kicking up huge fountains of spray along the piers.

Stone circled overhead, and as Moon dropped down for a landing on the roof of the ship's top steering cabin, he turned and dipped down toward the water, abruptly vanishing behind the fishing fleet's cradles. *I hope he knows what he's doing*, Moon thought.

He crouched on the edge of the cabin roof, the wind tearing at his frills. A door on the lowest deck opened and three groundlings hurriedly exited to climb carefully down the narrow ramp that connected the ship to the pier. Those must be Ardan's men, the ones who had been taught to make the ship lift itself out of the water when the leviathan moved. Moon glanced across to the docks. A small group of groundlings waited in the shelter of one of the rickety buildings, as far away from the churning water as possible. One was Magister Lethen.

So far so good. Moon climbed down to the deck just below, found a door, and stepped inside.

To be out of the wet wind was a relief. He flicked his spines, shaking off the spray, and tasted the air. He caught a scent of nervous groundling, but it was fading fast, probably from the men who had just left.

Still, he searched the ship quickly, looking into every room and cubby, but found no one hiding aboard. He came back out onto the main deck in time to see Jade and the warriors above the harbor, about to make the difficult aerial approach to the boat. Negal, Karsis, Esom, and the other groundlings were just coming down the steps onto the dock.

Lethen and his men moved out from the shelter to meet them. Moon jumped down to the pier. From this angle he could see the bottom of the *Klodifore*, its hull hovering a few paces above the swirling water. Waves rushed continuously over the pier and made the walk along it wet and dangerous. Moon reached the dock just as Negal and the others reached Lethen.

"You have it?" Lethen demanded, raising his voice to a bellow to be heard over the wind and water. The men with him weren't all

armed guards, and they weren't all blue-pearls; a few members of the other two dominant groundling races were present, the golden-skinned and darkskinned people. Some were dressed richly enough to be other magisters or prominent traders. A few wore working clothes.

Negal looked at Moon, who shifted to groundling, to startled exclamations from Lethen's companions. He took the bridle out of his pack and said, "Let them go to the ship, and I'll give it to you."

Lethen glared, frowned suspiciously at the bridle, then said, "Very well."

Negal threw Moon a guarded look and led his people past. This was their most vulnerable moment, but somehow Moon didn't think even a magister would have brought this diverse group out to see him betray the Raksura.

Moon waited until the groundlings had made the uneasy trek down the pier and were crossing the little walkway up to the ship. Jade and the warriors had already landed on the upper deck and were watching intently. Then he handed the bridle to Lethen.

The Magister turned it over, examined it carefully, rubbed at the crystals with his thumb. Then he grunted, and asked Moon, "Will you need assistance casting off?"

In other words, *go away and don't come back*. That suited Moon. He said, "No, thank you."

He turned his back on them and went to the edge of the dock, then shifted and reached the *Klodifore's* lower deck in two long bounds.

The groundlings were all aboard, gathered on the deck. "Thank you," Negal said to Moon. His voice shook a little, though he kept his expression calm. He looked back at the city, the towers rising on the leviathan's flanks. "I never thought we would leave this place."

"We're not gone yet." Captain Damison was still grim. "We'll need help to cast off. They've still got us tied to the—"

The deck jerked as the forward cable snapped. Moon said, "It's all right."

With a tremendous splash, Stone slung his big body up onto the pier, making the wood groan. He snapped the stern cable between his claws, then shifted to groundling. Rolling to his feet, he wrung out his shirt and crossed the walkway onto the deck.

Damison shouted orders in his own language and strode away toward the nearest hatch. Two men scrambled to cut the walkway

loose, while the others bolted along the deck. Negal followed Damison, and Esom and Orlis hurried inside to clatter down the first stairwell into the bowels of the ship. Karsis stood with Moon and Stone.

Drifting loose, the ship was already moving over the pier. Or the pier was moving under the ship as the leviathan pushed forward. Moon felt a tremor through the metal deck underfoot, and there was an answering rumble from somewhere deep in the hull. Then the ship rose a little higher and jolted into motion.

Moon swayed and Karsis caught the rail to steady herself as the *Klodifore* pulled rapidly away and turned to head for open water. As they came about, Stone muttered, "Uh oh." They were nearing the giant ridge of the leviathan's leg, which pumped rhythmically as the creature swam, water swirling in a dangerous whirlpool around it.

That could be a problem, Moon thought, glancing up to where Jade and the other Raksura climbed down from the top deck. If the ship was struck, the Raksura could get into the air, but the ship would be sucked under before they could get the groundlings out. And then the Raksura would be trapped out here. As aware of the danger as he was, Karsis leaned forward on the railing and said grimly, "We can make it. I know we can make it."

The big chimneys atop the ship belched white smoke, then it suddenly surged forward. The thrashing leg fell behind them and they angled sharply away. The city passed them rapidly, the creature's mountainous body moving forward with powerful strokes of its legs and tail.

Moon let out his breath in relief and shifted to groundling. They were going to miss the tail by a good distance. The wind fell away with the sound of the churning water. The sun was moving toward evening and then there was only the ship chugging along, a few paces above the gentle waves.

Karsis slumped, and her expression revealed relief and all the raw emotion she had been holding in check for all the months of her captivity. "I didn't think we'd ever get away."

"I didn't either, and we were only there for four days," Stone told her.

"It was a long four days," Moon admitted. Jade swung under the railing on the deck above and dropped down next to him. The others were all lined up there, watching the mountainous leviathan grow slowly smaller in the distance. The ship turned and Moon could feel they were heading east, as promised, back to the coast of the forest

Reaches.

Karsis pushed her hair back, her voice thick, as she got herself under control again. "If there's anything else we can do for you..."

"Show us a place where we can sleep," Jade said.



Karsis showed them to two small cabins, side by side, on the first deck above the water. Moon suspected they might have belonged to her and Esom, but he was too tired to care where the groundlings were going to sleep. Jade claimed the narrow bed in the first room, then divided the warriors up and made certain they would take turns on watch, just in case any groundlings decided to kill them. Moon was only dimly aware of most of that, since Jade had claimed the bed by dumping him in it, and as soon as his body was horizontal he had started to fall asleep.

He woke much later, with Jade in her Arbora form warm and heavy on top of him, her head pillowed on his chest, a knee pushed between his thighs. The room smelled of Raksura in groundling form who needed to bathe and wash their clothes. He was aware that the sun was now rising over the sea, that they had slept from the late afternoon through the night. *Flower's dead*, he remembered suddenly, with a spark of pain that brought him fully alert.

He could feel the ship still heading east, pulling a little toward the south, but that was probably the wind. The *Klodifore* vibrated in a way that the *Valendera* hadn't, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant. Soon they would be close enough to the coast to fly the rest of the way. There was something he needed to take care of first.

He nudged Jade gently, and she tightened her hold on him. "I have to get up," he whispered, and tugged on one of her head frills. She hummed low in her throat and rolled onto her side without really waking. He sat up and then had to spend a moment just looking at her. *You're lucky*, he told himself. He didn't think there were many young sister queens who would have willingly shouldered this responsibility, or who would have let their consorts take the risks he had. *I hope we're done with that now*. He was more than willing to get back to the colony and try living the normal Raksuran way.

Moon climbed out of the bunk and picked his way across the floor, where Chime, Balm, Song, and Vine were curled up on the spare cushions and blankets they had found in a cabinet. He opened the door quietly and stepped out into the corridor.

Floret sat on a cushion on the floor, leaning back against the wall.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, keeping her voice low. “We saved you some food.”

“Not yet.” Moon sat on his heels and glanced through the partly open doorway of the other room. Stone was sprawled in the bed, with River, Drift, and Root in a comfortable pile on one side of the room, and Rift on the other. “Has Rift tried to leave?”

“No. Everyone’s been quiet.” Floret sat forward, stretching her back. “Most of us woke up in the middle of the night to eat. The dried fish wasn’t as bad as Drift said it was. Karsis and the older one, the leader, came by once to see if we needed anything, but that’s it.”

“Good.” Moon pushed to his feet. “I’ll be back.”

The ship was quiet, but Moon could smell cooking odors, some kind of grain porridge. He followed the scent down a corridor and then a set of stairs, to a sitting area. There were couches against the walls, and Esom sat on one reading a leather-bound book. He was dressed in fresh clothes, and had replaced his broken spectacles with a different set. In the far wall was an open doorway leading to the room with the big metal stove and the storage for dishes and food supplies. A couple of crewmen were in there, eating at the table.

Esom looked up, blinking, startled out of deep concentration. “Oh, hello, Moon.”

Moon pulled a padded stool closer and sat down, facing Esom. “Can I talk to you?”

“Yes. Is something wrong?”

Moon couldn’t think of any way to ease up on the subject. He asked, “Did you kill Ardan?”

“What? No. What?” Startled, Esom closed the book and sat up. “I thought you said he fell and hit his head when the leviathan moved?”

“He might have. But the way he fell, it would make more sense if someone hit him from behind.” The men at the table in the next room had stopped eating, and watched them with a mix of suspicion and curiosity. They were a little too far away to hear the conversation.

“It wasn’t me.” Esom seemed earnest and baffled. “Stone left me on the west side of the chamber. I was trying to work my way over to the door to the tunnel, but with the water and the angle of the floor, it was slow going. I kept sliding down and ramming into the pillars. I’d just gotten within sight of the door when Stone came back for me.”

That sounded true, unfortunately. “I was hoping it was you.” Esom had plenty of reason to hate Ardan, and his friends had still

been trapped back in the tower; he might have seen it as the best opportunity to free them.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I see what you mean.” Esom looked thoughtful. “If not me, then who? Do you think it was one of his own men? I don’t think most of them knew he was in control of the leviathan. They may have suspected it, but...”

“But it doesn’t make much sense.”

“No,” Esom admitted. He leaned forward, struck by a sudden thought. “Unless one of them secretly worked for Magister Lethen.”

“Maybe,” Moon said, and let Esom talk about it until he could pretend to be convinced. He was fairly certain he knew who had killed Ardan, but he didn’t want to be on this ship when he confronted the guilty party.



Since they were getting along with the groundlings, they spent another day and a night resting on the *Klodifore*. Moon slept through most of it, though he made sure someone was always watching Rift. River and Drift became unwilling allies in this, since they distrusted Rift far more than they disliked Moon, and never hesitated to take a turn guarding him.

Moon hadn’t spoken about his suspicions to anyone but Esom. The weather was good, windy but clear. The ship stopped at one point and settled down in the water to fill its tanks directly from the freshwater sea. It was a far more convenient system than having to fill jars or buckets and haul them up the side, the way the Golden Islanders did on their boats. It meant there was plenty of bathing water, which they all took advantage of. The basins were small, but capable of producing hot water, which made up for a lot.

The rest of Negal’s crew had adjusted reluctantly to the presence of the Raksura, though they were still obviously wary. They stared at them, and asked Karsis and Esom questions, most of which they had to pass along to Moon or Chime. Or to Floret, who had spent a while talking with Karsis while waiting at the camp in the abandoned tower. The crew was especially nervous of Stone at first, but he used his uncanny ability to disarm groundling fears, which to the untrained eye involved hanging around in their cooking room and asking about their food. By the evening they were so used to him that none of them seemed to mind when he fell asleep in front of the stove in their main sitting area. Esom tried hard to talk to Chime about groundling magic, and Chime resorted to hiding in their cabin, clinging to the ceiling above the doorway where no one could see him from the corridor.

Moon didn't think these groundlings would ever be entirely comfortable with the presence of shifters, but maybe that was for the best. He hoped that the next time they left their isolated land, they would explore in a different direction.



On the morning of the second day aboard, Stone judged they were more than close enough for the warriors to make the flight to land. Moon stood on the highest deck with Chime. It was a sunny morning, and the groundlings had brought the ship to a hovering halt to make it easier for them to take off. On the deck just below, Jade spoke with Negal, formally taking their leave. The other warriors were still inside, with Balm tasked to make sure they were all prepared for the long flight.

Chime squinted toward the east, though they were a little too far out to see the shore. After the two days of rest, Chime was at least able to pretend to be like his usual self. He still hadn't talked about Flower yet, the way the others did, sharing good memories, but Moon thought he just needed more time. Moon nudged him with a shoulder. "Ready to get home?"

"Of course," Chime said, but he didn't sound ready. It might just be the flight to shore. Moon didn't think any of the warriors were looking forward to that.

"This is going to be interesting," Stone muttered, and leaned over the rail to gauge the distance down. His size made launching from the boat problematic.

"I could carry you up in the air and drop you," Moon offered, and dodged the resulting slap at his head.

Jade leapt up from below and swung over the railing. Balm and the other warriors clattered out of the hatch behind them, already shifted and ready to go. The groundlings came out onto the deck below to watch.

"Ready?" Jade asked, rippling her spines to test the wind. "The weather's perfect."

"It's not the weather we're waiting for," Moon told her.

Stone growled. "Hold on." He took a deep breath, and climbed up onto the railing. Then he flung himself forward. He shifted in mid-fall, eliciting gasps and cries of excitement from the groundlings. He flapped hard, wingtips brushing the water before he got enough lift to rise. Then he caught the wind and soared upward.

Moon and the others followed him over the rail. Karsis and Esom

waved and called goodbyes, and Moon waved back.

It was an easier flight toward the shore than away from it, and they were able to ride the wind the whole way. Moon kept an eye on Rift, making sure he didn't drop behind and turn back while the *Klodifore* was still in range.



It was late evening when they landed on the shore, about midway between the Kek city and the point where they had originally camped.

It was a grass-covered beach on the edge of the great forest, perfect for a night's camp. Stone climbed up a mountain-tree sapling to sleep on one of its big branches, while the warriors stretched and got ready to go hunting. Back on the *Klodifore*, they had decided to send Stone ahead with the seed and the urn. The Emerald Twilight mentors had given them instructions for trying to re-attach the seed, and the process sounded like it would take at least a few days. His ordinary pace was twice as fast as even Moon and Jade could fly, and he could get the seed back to the colony tree much faster alone. They were all going to have a big meal and sleep here tonight, then take off at dawn.

As the warriors broke up into hunting parties, Vine jerked his head toward Rift. "Do we still need to watch him? I mean, aren't we going to just let him go?" He looked from Jade to Moon, a little worried. "Or were we going to let him stay with us?" Rift was out of earshot, standing in the shadow of the trees, looking into the forest.

Jade lifted a brow at Moon, who said, "We're going to let him go. I'll take care of it."

Jade cocked her head, a little surprised. "You weren't—" She had clearly assumed Moon would want to at least ask Rift to stay. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's all right." He touched her hand in reassurance, and walked across the soft grass, into the forest shadow where Rift waited.

Rift glanced at Moon, and flattened his spines in deference. He said, "It's good to be back."

Moon didn't see any reason to waste time. He said, "Why did you kill Ardan?"

Rift's spines flicked, and he turned to face Moon. He shook his head, as if flustered. "Why do you think it was me? You said he was hit on the head. That's the way a groundling kills, not the way we do it."

Moon thought, *So he did do it.* He had been nearly certain, though there had been a slight chance that Esom's spy theory was true. But Rift had formulated that objection too fast for an innocent person, as if he had already thought about what he would say if he was accused. "Esom was the only groundling nearby, and he says it wasn't him. It could have been one of Ardan's men, who managed not to get washed away by the flood, but I don't think so." He watched Rift thoughtfully. "He was hit on the head so whoever found him would think a groundling did it."

Rift showed his teeth briefly. "And none of your friends are smart enough to think of that?"

"None of my friends would have bothered to hide it." All the Indigo Cloud Raksura could have killed Ardan to protect the seed, but none of them would have thought of concealing the act. Moon shook his head. "Ardan helped you. He took care of you. You could have left when he took you back to the Reaches to look for the seed. He could have chained you up, put spells on you, but he didn't. He didn't need to. He'd made you his friend, and that was the only chain he thought he needed. But he didn't really know you, did he?"

"You're wrong. He would never have let me leave." Rift leaned forward urgently. "He would have made me take him to steal another seed."

"Maybe." But something about his expression told Moon that Rift had just thought of that convenient excuse. "He wasn't afraid of you. He had his back to you."

Rift hissed, glaring at him. "So you've never killed anyone by stealth? You've never had to, to survive?"

Moon snorted. It was almost funny. "I killed a Fell ruler by stealth. But that was a Fell." It had made him a target and eventually brought the Fell to Indigo Cloud, but that was beside the point. "What's it like to kill someone who trusts you?"

Rift snarled silently and looked away, but there was something false about the emotion behind it. Moon realized at that moment what had bothered him all along about Rift. Rift had been playing a part for him, just like the groundlings who acted out plays for the festival crowds in Kish. Just like Moon had pretended to be a groundling for all those turns. *You saw through him, because he's not any better at it than you are.* That story that Rift had told, about being thrown out of his court because of a fight with another warrior, had been calculated to engender sympathy. Moon hadn't believed it at the time, and it seemed less and less likely the more he spoke to Rift.

Groundlings had always been wary of Moon because somehow they had sensed he was lying to them, even if they weren't sure why or what about. Now he knew just what that elusive sense of wrongness felt like.

For Moon, Rift had been playing the part of a poor lonely solitary who needed help, probably just a variation on the part he had played for Ardan, but more geared toward Raksuran sensibilities. The part he had played for the guards and the crew of the *Klodifore*, the groundlings he had been free to terrorize, was probably a lot closer to the real Rift. With considerably less patience, Moon said, "Just tell me why you did it."

"I've told you why. He wouldn't let me go." Rift sounded more sulky than angry.

"After you told him I was a solitary, he offered to let me stay on the leviathan, if I didn't want to go back with the court," Moon said. "What did you tell him, about why you left your court?"

Rift tensed up again, his spines trembling. "I didn't tell him anything."

"If you'd lied to him to make him feel sorry for you, that wouldn't have mattered. I lived with groundlings; everything I did and said was a lie. But what if you told him the truth, and you couldn't take the chance that he'd tell us." It was a guess, but Moon saw Rift's whole body go rigid.

Rift bared his fangs. "You're assuming I was planning to beg to join your court. From what I've heard, it's so close to dying off, they had to take a solitary as a consort."

Moon didn't take the bait, but it made him more certain he was on the right trail. "No, I'm assuming you want to find another group of Raksura to get close to, because you're tired of killing groundlings."

Rift's expression was more amused than anything else. He said, "They're just groundlings."

"Arbora are just groundlings who can shift. Is that who you killed at your old court, until they figured it out?"

Rift shook his head, still amused, then lunged for Moon. Moon had been waiting for that. He ducked away from Rift's clawed swipe, and punched him in the face hard enough to stun him. Then he caught his throat and slammed him down on his back. Low and close to his ear, Moon said, "Better stick with helpless groundlings, and leave feral consorts alone."

Rift whimpered, such a patently false manipulation that Moon

almost tore his throat out right there. Rift said, "I'll go. You'll never see me again."

"If I do, you're dead." Moon dragged him upright and tossed him away, further into the forest. Rift tumbled into a crouch, threw one last look back, then bolted away into the trees.

Moon turned back toward the others, only just now realizing they were all gathered on the grassy beach, watching him. Even Stone had dropped back out of the tree and stood there in groundling form.

Root said, "I'm confused. I thought Rift was a nice solitary, like Moon."

Song clapped a hand over her eyes in embarrassment. Vine told Root, "Remember how I told you you weren't allowed to talk anymore?"

Root hissed at him, but Moon ignored all the byplay. Jade seemed concerned, and he doubted it was because of the aborted fight. She said, "Should I ask?"

Moon shrugged, rippled his spines to take the tension out of his back. "Balm was right."

Jade looked at Balm, who shrugged too. She said, "I just said that that solitary was not like him."

Jade flicked her spines in acknowledgement, and smiled at her. "Good." She turned to the others. "Go now, if you want to get back before dark."

The group reluctantly broke up. Balm took Chime's wrist and led him away, saying, "We'll build a fire and make tea." Moon could see River struggling with the urge to make a comment, and the knowledge that Jade would probably not react well to it and that he was still several days away from Pearl's protection. He finally looped an arm around Drift's neck and hauled him away.

"Are you going to say 'I told you so'?" Moon asked Stone. Stone rolled his eyes and turned to go back to his tree.

Jade stepped up to Moon. As he shifted to groundling, she put an arm around his waist and pulled him against her. Keeping her voice low, she said, "I know that was hard."

He leaned his forehead against hers. It had been hard, even knowing what Rift was really like. "He wasn't who I hoped he was."

Chapter Nineteen

Moon and Jade saw Stone off at dawn the next morning, while the warriors slept in a little longer. From the wide branch of the mountain tree, they could see the rising sun reflecting rose and gold off the wispy clouds. It would be another good day for flying.

Stone stretched extravagantly, yawned, and told Jade, “Don’t think I don’t know why you’re sending me ahead.”

Jade nodded. “So Pearl can take it out on you instead of us.”

Moon knew they were right, but he couldn’t help saying, “We got the seed back. What kind of sense does that make?”

“Sense doesn’t enter into it where queens are concerned,” Stone told him. He jerked his head at Jade. “Get used to it.”

Jade folded her arms, regarding him deliberately. “Please. Coming from you, that’s funny.” She hesitated, her gaze on the pack that held the urn and the carefully bundled seed. “Don’t let Pearl hold Flower’s farewell until we get there.”

Stone shouldered the bulky pack without apparent effort, though with the urn it was almost four paces tall. He said, “I won’t.” With that, he walked to where the branch sloped down, and jumped off. He shifted in mid-fall, snapped his wings out to catch the air and flapped to stay aloft, hard wingbeats taking him away through the forest.

Watching him vanish in the green shadows, Moon realized he didn’t even know what Raksura did with their dead. He knew from what the others had said that the bodies at the old colony had been burned inside the ruin, with the Fell dragged out and left for predators along the river bank, but he didn’t know what the normal practice was. He said, “What’s going to happen at Flower’s farewell?”

He hadn’t phrased the question particularly well, but Jade understood what he meant. “At the old colony, we buried our dead in the gardens. But here... The histories said that there’s a place down in the roots of the tree for burials of Arbora and warriors. They used to put the royal Aeriati inside the wood itself, somehow, and made the tree grow over them. I don’t think we know how to make that happen anymore.”

Stone had said something about that, when they had found the urn in Ardan's collection. That thought made Moon remember just how much he wanted to return to the tree. "I don't care how crazy Pearl is going to be, I can't wait to get back."

Jade smiled at him. "Then wake the warriors and let's go."



They still took it easy on the warriors, finding a place to camp before dark and sleeping past dawn. One evening, they stopped on a mountain-tree platform to rest and hunt the herd of furry grasseaters grazing on one of the stretches of open meadow. They weren't too hungry, so Jade told Balm, River, and Floret to only take three kills, while the others got a camp ready.

Moon flew up to a branch to keep watch over them, so had a good view of it when River tried to slam Balm out of the way and take the buck she was stooping on. Balm, who had either been expecting something like this or just had lightning-fast reflexes, rolled up and away from the blow, twisted to come down on top of River, and flung him out of her way. River righted himself with a couple of wild flaps, Balm took her kill, and Floret circled away to make it clear she wasn't involved.

When the warriors returned to the camp, no one mentioned the incident. Moon just smiled to himself. Balm obviously had no intention of allowing River to push her around anymore.

They traveled steadily for six days with no trouble, then ran into a heavy rain that lasted a day and a night. It was too heavy to fly through, so they took shelter in a hollow in an ancient, dying mountain-tree. The tree was crumbling and the hollow had leaks, something they didn't discover until it was raining hard enough that no one wanted to venture out to look for a better shelter.

It didn't make for a good night's sleep, and they all emerged early the next morning wet and cranky. To make up for it, Jade decided they would make camp on a small forest platform nearby, with the idea that full stomachs would make up for the lack of sleep.

Jade, Balm, and Song stayed at the campsite, and the others broke up into groups for hunting. Moon went with Chime, with Root tagging along, and they flew some distance from the camp before they found a platform big enough for a grasseater herd.

They took a big buck, and Moon bled the carcass by draping it over the branch, while Chime and Root kept a lookout for predators. "You think Stone's had time to get there yet?" Chime asked. He sat

nearby, and Root was above them, exploring the knobs and hollows on an upper branch.

Moon thought about it, gauging time and distance and Stone's superior speed. "No, not yet." They were taking the direct route from the coast to Indigo Cloud, but Stone had planned to stop at Emerald Twilight. He should have reached it two or three days ago, and he would have stayed the night at least, both for the meal and the chance to sleep. He would have also told them about the seed and how they had gotten it back, in order to make sure Emerald Twilight knew Indigo Cloud was no longer a weak court at the verge of disaster. Jade had thought this would make for a better chance of good future relations between the two courts. "It'll probably take him another day or so."

"The others will be so relieved that we got the seed back." Chime frowned. "Until he tells them about Flower." He shook his head. "At least by the time we get there..."

Moon hesitated, but Root was still on the branch above them, occupied with poking a stick into a hole, and wasn't listening. He said, "It's still going to be hard. They're all going to want to talk to you about her."

"I know." Chime shrugged his spines uneasily. "It's not that I don't want to talk about her, but it's just... hard right now. We knew she was dying for so long, and yet it still feels like it happened so quickly. I guess I was too good at putting it out of my mind, pretending she was going to be fine if she just got more rest."

Moon nudged the carcass over, and sat back on his heels, hooking his disemboweling claws into the wood to steady himself. "Did you have a chance to talk to her about what happened inside the leviathan? How you kept getting—" He waved a hand beside his head. "Visions from it?"

"No. I wish I had." Chime looked up at Moon, the scales on his brow furrowed with worry. "Esom kept wanting to talk about it. He seemed to think I'm going to be able to sense things like he can. I told him I wasn't like a groundling sorcerer, and I wasn't going to be like one, no matter what."

"Would it be so bad if you were?"

Chime glared at him. "Yes." He glanced back around, toward the west. "The others are coming this way."

Moon stood and leaned over the steaming carcass to see if it was ready to move. Then Chime said, "Wait. Who's that with—" His voice

sharpened. "That's not them."

"What?" Moon looked, straightening up. Four warriors... no, five warriors came toward them through the trees. The colors and sizes were all wrong; these were strangers. "We're about a day's flight from Emerald Twilight." He looked down at the carcass, belatedly wondering if they were trespassing. "Are we hunting in their territory?"

"Yes, but we're just passing through. Nobody cares about that." Chime pushed to his feet, watching the warriors approach.

There were two big males with copper-red scales, a smaller blue male, and two females, one green and one dull yellow. It was obvious they were heading this way. Maybe nobody cared about poaching back in the territory the old Indigo Cloud colony had occupied, but things might be different here in the Reaches. Moon said, "Root, come down here."

Root dropped from the branch above to land next to Moon. "What do they want?" he asked, sounding a little nervous.

"We don't know." Moon wondered what the penalty for poaching was, if they would have to fight, and how many warriors he could take out on his own. Chime wasn't the best fighter, and Root was still on the small side. Chime's spines flicked uneasily and he whispered, "This isn't good. I don't know everything about being a warrior, but I don't think they should be approaching a strange consort like this."

Moon flicked his spines back. "If they're from Emerald Twilight, they know who we are. We're not strangers."

"Still..." Chime muttered.

The warriors banked in, then split up at the last moment so that three landed on the branch above and two came down on this branch, about ten paces from Moon, Chime, and Root. There was something about them that made Moon's spines itch. He didn't recognize any of them from Emerald Twilight, but there had been a lot of warriors and he hadn't been paying much attention to the ones clustered around the younger queens.

The green female had landed on their branch, and now she said, "What court are you from?"

She didn't sound angry or aggressive, and Root and Chime both lowered their ruffled spines. Chime said, "We're on our way back to Indigo Cloud. Are you from—"

Something hit Moon in the face, a wet membrane filled with liquid, thrown by one of the warriors above them. He staggered back a

step, startled more than hurt, and snarled in surprised fury. Root growled, astonished, and crouched to leap upward. But Chime grabbed for Moon, shouting, “No, don’t breathe, don’t breathe!”

But the heavy sweet fumes of the splattered liquid filled his lungs, his head. Another membrane hit Chime in the side of the head and he jerked away. Moon stumbled sideways, darkness closing in around him rapidly, falling...



Moon drifted awake slowly, weighed down by a heavy lassitude. He felt oddly reluctant to move. He made himself turn his head, and felt leaves and branches creak and rustle beneath him, smelled the pungent scent of crushed foliage. *Leaves?* he thought, and remembered falling. He opened his eyes.

He was lying on a woven surface of leafy branches, more branches arching over him, latticed with big broad fern fronds. Chime lay beside him, sprawled on his back with one arm over his eyes. They were both in their groundling forms. The reason for the shelter was obvious; rain pattered gently on it. The light coming through the leaves was much darker, and it felt close to early evening. Moon rubbed his forehead, frowning. *I don’t remember...* anything. How they had gotten here, building the shelter, where here was.

Something stirred behind him; there was someone else in here with them. He managed to roll to his side and shove himself up on one arm.

A young warrior in groundling form sat near the mouth of the makeshift shelter. He was heavily built, with light copper skin and red-brown hair, and wore a faded gold vest and pants, and copper armbands with polished grey-white stones. Moon stared, trying unsuccessfully to recognize him.

Then the warrior smiled complacently and said, “Don’t be afraid.”

“What?” Instinctively, Moon tried to shift. But he felt the pressure, the constriction that halted the change, that meant there was a queen nearby deliberately preventing him from shifting. *That doesn’t make sense... wait.* Memory returned. The strange warriors. *They drugged me.* The liquid the warrior had thrown at him had been a simple to cause sleep. Moon snarled, lunged forward, and slammed the heel of his hand into the warrior’s face.

Moon had moved too quickly for the warrior to shift. He reeled back with a yelp and clutched his bloody nose. Moon shoved him aside, scrambled out of the shelter, and pushed to his feet.

They were on a platform high in the suspended forest, in a small camp in a clearing surrounded by fern tree saplings. The mountain-tree supporting the platform arched and twisted above them, the giant branches deflecting most of the rain, so it fell on them only as a light drizzle. There were two other shelters, just lean-tos, with warriors scattered around, all staring at Moon. He counted at least seven, all still in their winged forms. It looked like a semi-permanent camp. They had dug a small firepit in the center, and there was an embossed metal kettle on the coals. Then a queen stepped out from the shadow of one of the shelters. Moon had been half-expecting Ash, young, arrogant, foolishly persistent Ash. But it wasn't her.

For a moment he thought it was Tempest. Her scales were the same light blue, the webbed overlay the same tint of gold. But this queen's build was a little slighter, her features sharper. Moon tried to shift again, just on the off chance she would let him, but the pressure preventing him was still there.

She eyed the warrior with the bloody nose, who stumbled to his feet, then cocked her head speculatively at Moon. She said, "So that rumor about you being a fighter wasn't all talk."

Chime crawled out of the shelter, tried to stand, and sat down hard. He focused on Moon, and said, worried and wary, "What happened?"

Moon shook his head to show he had no idea. He asked the queen, "Who are you?" She hadn't been introduced with the other queens at Emerald Twilight; he would have remembered her. *Unless that was her out on the balcony when Ash fought Jade, and not Tempest.* At that distance, it would have been hard to tell them apart. "You were with Ash, at Emerald Twilight?"

She inclined her head. "I'm surprised you noticed me. I'm Halcyon."

Halcyon. From her appearance, and her name... "You're Tempest's clutchmate?"

"Yes. And I'm afraid I'm the one who provoked Ash to challenge your queen. It was her own impulse to confront you in the greeting hall, but I decided to make use of the opportunity. Ash has always been easily led." Halcyon stepped toward him, casually rippling her spines to shed the rainwater. "And she'll be blamed, when word of your disappearance is carried to Emerald Twilight."

Moon's head was beginning to clear, enough to realize just how much trouble they were in. Chime said, incredulously, "You've been out here all this time, waiting for us?"

“No, only for the past three days, since your line-grandfather stopped at Emerald Twilight,” Halcyon tilted her head, still studying Moon. “All we had to do was search the direct routes from the coast to Indigo Cloud.” She added, “You were easy to find, but we won’t be. We’re a half a day’s travel away from where my warriors found you, not in the direction of Emerald Twilight.”

They wouldn’t have caught us, if we hadn’t stopped for the rain. Moon bet Halcyon had forced her warriors to fly through it. “Why? What do you get out of this?” He couldn’t believe that besting Indigo Cloud, small and struggling as it was, would be any kind of triumph for an Emerald Twilight queen. And he couldn’t believe that an ex-feral consort from an unknown bloodline was that big a prize.

Halcyon took another step toward him. “Ice is nearing the end of her reign, and the last thing she wants is trouble from another court. She’ll have to punish Ash, and Tempest will step forward to shield her, and be disgraced.”

Moon exchanged a look with Chime, who grimaced in dismay. Moon turned back to Halcyon. “And that will leave you as sister queen? What about all the others?”

Halcyon flicked her spines, this time in a shrug. “Ice knows I’m the only one who could replace Tempest. I’m not worried about the others.”

I’m worried about us, Moon thought. This plan wouldn’t work with a live consort or warrior around to explain that Ash wasn’t the guilty party. He wasn’t sure why they were both still alive now. *Wait, we weren’t alone.* He looked around and didn’t see any sign of a third prisoner. He demanded, “What did you do to Root?”

“The young warrior who was with you?” Halcyon glanced at one of her warriors, the big green-scaled woman.

The warrior snorted with contempt. “Nothing. He ran away.”

Chime hissed at her. “He wouldn’t run away, he’s too stupid. You hurt him.”

“We didn’t,” the warrior said, and her spines ruffled angrily. She repeated with emphasis, “He ran away.”

Moon didn’t believe it either. *Root might be dead.* But if he had run back to the others, all he could tell them was that strange warriors, possibly from Emerald Twilight, had taken Moon and Chime away. Which would suit Halcyon’s purpose completely.

Maybe she had planned to kill them, but when it came down to it, found it hard to take that final step. Especially with a consort. Maybe

she just wasn't certain if her warriors would go that far. Moon didn't think pretending he didn't understand that would do any good. "When are you going to kill us?"

Chime made a faint noise. Either he hadn't realized this inevitable component to Halcyon's plan, or he just didn't want Moon to mention it aloud.

The warriors stirred a little uneasily, but Halcyon hissed with amusement. She stepped close, close enough for Moon to feel her breath. Every muscle tensed and the back of Moon's neck prickled, but he didn't step back, didn't drop his gaze.

She said, with dry amusement, "I didn't say I'd kill you."

"Then what did you plan to do with me?"

"That's up to you. You could cooperate." Halcyon trailed the back of her claws against his cheek, sending a shivering pulse down Moon's spine.

"What do you mean?" Moon was fairly certain he knew exactly what she meant, but he wanted to stall. It had to take extra concentration to keep Moon and Chime from shifting without affecting her own warriors. All they needed was a chance to escape. Moon thought he could outfly a queen, especially a queen who hadn't been doing much of anything but sitting around Emerald Twilight plotting against her clutchmate. It was Chime he was worried about; with all the long distance flying they had been doing lately, Chime might have an advantage over the other warriors. But a queen could catch a warrior easily. Which was probably why they had bothered to drug Chime and bring him along, as a hostage for Moon's good behavior.

As if in idle speculation, Halcyon said, "I could say I took you from Ash. Your queen wouldn't want you after that. You could stay with me."

Moon hoped she couldn't hear how hard his heart was pounding. "I think you're underestimating my queen."

She laughed. "They said you knew very little of our ways. I see they were right."

"What about your consort?" Presumably he was back at Emerald Twilight, enjoying the respite from his queen.

Her lip curled. "He does what I tell him to do." Her hand dropped and she ran sheathed claws down Moon's throat. "A change would be interesting."

“No,” Moon said, reacting before his brain caught up to him. *Keep stalling*, he thought. Keeping himself and Chime alive was all that mattered. “It wouldn’t—”

A sound high above them made everyone look up. It was a warrior, flying down from the upper branches. *Not flying*, Moon realized. He was falling. One of the others leapt up to catch him, breaking his fall. But the others stared at what hurtled down after him.

A flash of vivid blue and silver-gray resolved into Jade, wings spread and spines furred, as she dropped down on them like vengeance itself.

With a startled growl, Halcyon jerked Moon around, his back to her, her claws pressed against his throat. She yelled at the warriors and they sprang into the air to attack.

Jade flared her wings to meet them. She slapped three Emerald Twilight warriors out of the air without a pause for breath, then closed with a big male and tossed him aside in a spray of blood.

Root appeared out of nowhere, leapt on a smaller warrior, and wrestled him off a branch, but Moon didn’t see any of the others. Not that Jade needed them, apparently. Moon couldn’t do anything but stare, Halcyon’s claws pricking his skin. He had seen Jade fight Fell, but never seen her take on other Raksura, not when she was really angry. The fight with Ash had been nothing; these warriors had no chance against her.

Halcyon must have realized it too. She shrieked, “Stop! I’ll rip his throat out!”

The remaining warriors broke off and veered away from Jade. Three were gone, either fallen to the forest floor or caught on the branches and platforms somewhere below them. Some of the others flapped unsteadily to nearby branches, badly wounded. Root dropped to land on the platform near Chime, who crouched uneasily.

Jade snapped her wings in and landed ten paces away from Moon and Halcyon. Flexing her bloody claws, she bared her fangs. She radiated fury like a furnace. Her scales were slick with rain but unmarked. None of the warriors had been able to land a claw on her. She took in Halcyon’s position, how she was using Moon as a shield, and sneered. “Coward.”

Halcyon snarled, her voice rising in rage. “Bitch.”

Jade hissed an unpleasant laugh. “Dead woman.”

Halcyon tossed Moon aside and leapt for her. Moon hit the wet

grass with a thump and rolled, then scrambled up. Jade and Halcyon slammed into each other, tumbled across the platform, and broke apart. Their scales were already streaked with scratches and blood. They circled each other, moving fast, then Halcyon darted in and nearly caught a slash across the face.

Moon tried to shift to his winged form and hissed with relief when the change flowed over him. Halcyon was obviously too distracted to maintain control over him. But unlike Ash, Halcyon was closer to an even match for Jade. And after that brief conversation, Moon doubted either of them were in any state to think about consequences or negotiate. He stepped over to the firepit and grabbed the kettle. It was a heavy one, with an iron bottom meant to hold warming stones. As Halcyon ducked away from a slash, Moon lunged in and slammed her in the head with it, putting all his weight behind the blow.

Halcyon jolted forward, right into a blow from Jade that rocked her head back. Between that and the kettle, she dropped like a rock.

Jade stood over her, breathing hard. She stared at Moon, incredulous, offended, and still wild-eyed. "What was that?" she demanded, her voice gravelly with rage.

"You can't kill her," Moon said deliberately. He dropped the kettle beside the firepit and shifted back to groundling, hoping that would calm Jade down. Halcyon's head was cut and bleeding, some of her spines broken and crushed, but he saw her furled wings tremble, showing she was still breathing. "We have to take her back to Emerald Twilight and make her tell what she tried to do." If Jade killed her, the warriors could lie about what had happened, claim they were attacked. Emerald Twilight might choose to believe them just to avoid the disgrace.

Jade didn't think much of that idea. A growl thickening her voice, she said, "She won't tell them. She'll lie."

"Her warriors won't, if you threaten them. Tell them you'll kill her unless they tell the truth." The survivors had all fled the tree, but Jade could still catch one if she hurried.

Jade shook her spines and hissed in pure fury. Root shifted to groundling and dropped to a crouch, prudently not taking sides. But in a small voice, Chime contributed, "You can ask for a mentor as witness when you get to Emerald Twilight. That will involve the Arbora, and the other queens can't pretend it didn't happen. They'll be forced to deal with her."

Jade shook her spines and grimaced with contempt. "We'll never

get her there without killing her, so I might as well do it now.”

Moon countered, “They have simples that make you sleep. It worked on me. It’ll probably work on a queen.”

Jade’s shout of thwarted rage was so loud it hurt Moon’s ears. He winced, and Chime and Root both flattened themselves down in the grass and covered their heads. She stalked back and forth, then stopped and flung her hands in the air. “You’re right! I’ll go get a damn warrior. If that piece of excrement moves—” She growled again and flung herself into the air.

“Get the green female!” Moon yelled after her. She had seemed like the leader of the warriors, and was probably the one most attached to Halcyon.

Root sat up to watch Jade speed away. “She carried me here, so I could show her the way,” he confided to Moon. “I’ve never flown so fast!”

Chime pushed to his feet. Shaking a little, he wiped the sweat off his forehead. “I’ll go look for the simple. It’s probably in one of these shelters.” He went to the first one and ducked down to look through the entrance.

“Hurry.” Moon sat down the grass, keeping a wary eye on Halcyon. The simple had given him a headache and a dry throat. His neck was bleeding a little from Halcyon’s claws, but not enough to worry about. It felt like the end of a very long day, though so far he had only been conscious for a small part of it. “Where are the others?” he asked Root.

“On their way here, following Jade’s markers. We were going to wait until they caught up, and attack in the middle of the night, but —” Root waved a hand, indicating the disturbed camp. “Jade changed her mind.”

“This is it.” Chime came out of the shelter, holding a lizardskin bag, intricately tooled and dyed. He sat down to rummage in it and pulled out various cloth packets and a couple of stoppered bottles. “I’ll have to mix another batch, but it won’t take long. You don’t have to be a mentor to make it work, which is probably why they picked this one.”

Moon reached over to ruffle Root’s hair. “So you just pretended to run away?”

Root nodded, fairly pleased with himself. “Right, until they stopped chasing me. Then I followed them from a distance, until they got to this camp. Then I flew back to find Jade. We left the others, so

we could get back here by dark.”

Chime glanced up from the herb packets. “That was smart.”

“I know.” Then Root popped up and cuffed Chime in the head. “Ow!” Chime protested in outrage, reeling back.

“I heard what you said earlier. I’m not stupid,” Root said, coming back to sit next to Moon. “I have a big mouth, but I’m not stupid. There’s a difference. A big difference.”

“Hey, no hitting,” Moon said belatedly. Though he figured Root probably did owe Chime that one.

“I’m sorry.” Chime subsided, looking abashed.

“Jade’s back,” Moon said, and got to his feet.

Jade dropped down to the platform and flung the dazed warrior to the ground. She was in groundling form, a tall woman with light bronze skin and reddish hair. Her shirtsleeves were torn, and there were scratch marks on her arms, and a few rapidly darkening marks on her face about the size of Jade’s fist. “Are you happy?” Jade shouted at Moon.

“Yes,” he told her. “But I’m easy to please right now.”

Oddly enough, Jade didn’t appreciate the joke.

While she paced, fumed, and made certain that any of Halcyon’s warriors still lurking in the area knew that a rescue attempt would end in a bloodbath, Root tied up the female warrior and Chime made the simple. Halcyon was groaning and starting to wake by the time he finished, but once it was administered she settled into a deep sleep. While searching the packs left behind for rope, Moon found a cake of very good tea, so he built up the fire again, filled the dented kettle from a waterskin, and made some. Chime and Root went to scout for injured warriors, and found three dead, victims of the first clash with Jade. They found a few blood trails, but the survivors must have retrieved all their wounded.

Darkness had fallen and it was well into the night before the Indigo Cloud warriors arrived. It was good timing, because it had taken about that long for Jade to calm down.

While Chime and Root greeted them and answered questions and traded various congratulations and recriminations, Moon stood up and stretched his back. His headache had gone, but he had spent most of the time sitting by the fire, watching Jade stare grimly at Halcyon’s unconscious body, braced to intervene if she suddenly changed her mind about leaving the other queen alive.

Moon circled around the fire to the shadows where Jade stood. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know you wanted to rescue me, again."

"I did rescue you," she pointed out, though she sounded more huffy than angry. Her sigh was too weary to be a hiss. "Did you have to hit her with the kettle?"

"It had a handle. It was easier than a rock." Moon felt some of the tension melt out of his spine. As impressive as she was while enraged and defending her consort, he still liked her normal self better.

"It's not going to make a very good story, in the annals of my time as sister queen." She quoted dryly, "'Then her consort jumped up and knocked the foreign queen unconscious with a kettle.'"

"If Cloud had been fast with a kettle, then you wouldn't be here," Moon admitted.

"That is hardly fair to Indigo. Indigo was nothing like—" She waved a hand back toward the camp. "That."

Before she could get worked up again, he took her wrist. "Come on, the others can keep watch. Let's go to bed."

"Sometimes you have good ideas," she said grudgingly, and let him tow her over to the shelter.



The trip to Emerald Twilight took a day and a half, with Jade and Balm taking turns carrying the unconscious Halcyon, and Vine carrying the woman warrior, whose name turned out to be Torrent. During the awkward and desultory conversation around the camp at night, she admitted that she was from a queen's clutch, sister to Tempest and Halcyon. She seemed to feel bad enough, so Moon managed not to ask her if there were any sisters besides Tempest from that clutch who weren't crazy.

They knew Halcyon's surviving warriors followed them at a distance, but none of them ventured any closer, or tried to talk to them. Balm said, "I bet they would have tried to stop us if we were heading toward Indigo Cloud. But they know we must be taking her back to Emerald Twilight. They're probably going to quietly slip back into the colony, and hope Ice is too distracted by dealing with Halcyon to worry about who was with her."

Once they arrived at the court, Jade didn't waste any time. She dropped the still limp Halcyon on the landing platform outside the greeting hall, and Vine set the woman warrior down. At first the warriors and Arbora who hurried out seemed to think that they had found Halcyon and Torrent injured in the forest, and brought them

back here for help. It was reassuring evidence that only Halcyon's group of warriors had been involved in the plot, and that most of the court had known nothing about it. But it made Moon feel even worse for those about to hear the truth. Then Jade demanded a mentor be called as witness, and the whole colony had seemed to go still.

One of the older mentors who had helped Flower came out, and Tempest, Ash, and three of the other sister queens, and every warrior and Arbora who could get outside in time. They all listened in shocked silence to Torrent's guilty recital. Tempest kept her expression under control, though her spines trembled with the effort. Ash kept alternately flaring hers and flattening them, looking from Jade to Tempest to the other queens, incredulous and horrified.

Afterward, Tempest stiffly offered Jade hospitality, seemed relieved when Jade refused it, and they left. Ice and Shadow hadn't appeared, and Moon was glad for it, because the whole thing had been deeply embarrassing. He made a resolution to ask Stone if he had ever fathered any clutches who tried to kill each other and what to do if they did.

It was a relief to be shed of Halcyon and Torrent, and they made good time back to Indigo Cloud, reaching it during the late afternoon five days later.

As they approached the colony tree, Moon could see already that the Arbora had made progress while they were gone.

Several of the garden platforms had neat planting beds built, others had plots that had been stripped of grass and were now covered with turned earth. The weeds and moss that had choked the main runoff pools were gone, the deadfall cleared away from some of the old orchards. There were Arbora out on the platforms too, digging in the gardens, weeding, moving baskets of dirt. The two flying boats were still anchored in place, with a few Arbora climbing over them, sanding claw-damaged wood and making other repairs.

Warrior lookouts had already spotted them and carried the word to the tree. More warriors flew out to meet them, and swooped around and called out greetings. Moon and Jade and the others landed in the knothole and were almost swept through the passage into the greeting hall by a happy swarm of Arbora.

The well rapidly filled up with Raksura, coming up the stairs from the level below or dropping down from above. All the shell-lights were lit, and caught reflections off the polished wood and the rich carving, the slim pillars along the criss-crossed stairs, the overhanging balconies. The waterfall across from the entrance ran clear and fresh,

streaming down the wall to the pool in the floor, which now boasted floating flowers.

Heart pushed her way through the growing crowd to hug Jade impulsively, and tell her, "We were so worried! We expected you days ago!"

"We were delayed unexpectedly. I have to tell Pearl about it first." Jade released Heart and asked anxiously, "What about the seed? Is it all right?"

Heart admitted, "We're not sure yet. The instructions the Emerald Twilight mentors sent said it had to be coated in mud from below the roots and then soaked in heartwater." Before Moon could ask, she said, "That's the water drawn up through the roots. We had to get it just as it came out of the wood, through the spring in the top of the tree. But first we had to find the spring. That took most of a day. Stone thought he knew where it was, but apparently it moves around when the tree grows. Or that's what Stone said, anyway. Now we're just waiting to see if it will show the signs that it's ready to be placed in the tree."

"I see." Jade exchanged a worried look with Moon. It had been a big unspoken fear that all Ardan's meddling with the seed might have damaged it somehow. Moon had been hoping that fear would be banished by the time they arrived. It wasn't good to hear that they would still have to wait and see.

Heart turned to Chime, and they looked at each other a long moment. They had been Flower's last students, and Chime couldn't act on her teaching anymore. Heart stepped forward and Chime caught her in his arms, burying his face against her shoulder.

Stone wandered up out of the crowd, stopped and eyed Moon for a moment, then nudged his shoulder. "You all right?"

"Yes." Suddenly that was all Moon could trust himself to say. He felt like he had never really come home before, not to a permanent home, not to a place where everyone knew the real him. He couldn't even trust himself to shift to his groundling form, even though it was technically rude to stay like this while Stone was a groundling. What he really wanted to do was run away and hide in a corner, and enjoy this intense, unaccustomed feeling privately.

Then Pearl dropped down from the levels above. Arbora and warriors scattered to make way for her. River impulsively started toward her, and remembered just in time to stop and wait with the others, while she greeted Jade. Moon was so emotional at the moment he even felt a spark of pity. River might sleep in Pearl's bower, but he

would never be her consort, anymore than Chime could ever be an Arbora again.

“You’re late,” Pearl said, and frowned at Jade. “Stone was ready to go out looking for you.” Then her gaze hardened. She had obviously spotted the recent scratches on Jade’s scales, though they had faded over the past few days. Knowing Pearl, she might even be able to tell they had been made by another queen. Her spines started to lift in agitation. “What happened?”

Jade set her jaw and braced herself. “Halcyon, a sister queen from Emerald Twilight, tried to steal Moon.”

Moon had half-expected Pearl to express disappointment that Halcyon hadn’t succeeded. But Pearl’s eyes went black with fury. Her spines stiffened, until they flared out around her head.

Stone lifted his brows and gave Moon an incredulous look. Moon shrugged helplessly. Pearl ignored them. Her voice flat, she said to Jade, “Did you kill her?”

Jade’s spines lifted in response, but she kept her temper. She said, “No.” Her voice heavy with irony, she said, “I was persuaded not to.”

Moon belatedly shifted to groundling. The last thing he wanted at the moment was Pearl’s attention. But Pearl stayed focused on Jade. She tilted her head, her gaze hardened to ice. “Why not?” The words dropped into a near perfect silence. No one in the hall breathed. Moon could hear the breeze rustling leaves outside.

Jade flicked her spines. “I didn’t want to start a war. We took her back to Emerald Twilight with one of her warriors, and made the warrior speak before a mentor.” She paused, and added deliberately, “They owe us a great debt now.”

Pearl was silent for so long there were probably warriors in the hall starting to suffer from lack of air. Then she said, “I’m surprised you thought of that, in the heat of the moment.”

Moon tried not to react in any way. He wondered if he had made things worse by talking Jade out of immediate vengeance. But Jade was calm and didn’t take Pearl’s bait. She said, “It seemed the best course.”

Pearl held her gaze a moment more, then said, “We’ll see.”

She turned away, and the whole hall took a collective breath of relief. Out of the corner of his eye, Moon saw Chime’s knees buckle, and Heart and Balm reach hastily to steady him.

As the crowd parted for Pearl, she lifted one hand in a signal to

River. He hurried after her. Moon regretted the sympathetic impulse. Keeping his voice low, he said, "He'll tell her everything that happened."

"So he will." Jade wasn't worried. The long flight here from Emerald Twilight had evidently given her a much more sanguine perspective on the situation. "She'll see the advantages."

"Somebody needs to tell me everything that happened," Stone pointed out. "But you need to do it on the way to the nurseries, because Frost accused me of leaving you somewhere for dead, and she's managed to convince the rest of the clutches that she's right."

Moon winced. When he had left, he had been afraid of something like that happening, but there hadn't been any real choice.

Jade took his wrist and pulled him with her as she followed Stone. She said, wryly, "We'll both go. I think I need to spend more time with Frost."

Moon thought that was probably the best thing they could do.

□

They held the farewell for Flower later that evening, after Jade and Moon and the warriors had had a chance to sleep and rest. The Arbora had found a niche in one of the walls up in the unused Aeri levels, which Stone said was one of the old grave niches for royal urns. Heart and the other mentors didn't know how to make the wood grow to seal the niche yet, but it would still make a good resting place.

The whole court sang for Flower. Moon didn't contribute, but he made himself sit still for the whole uncomfortable performance. It wasn't as eerie this time, though it still felt alien to him.

Afterward, Moon ended up sitting outside with Chime on a ledge above the waterfall. They watched the tiny flying lizards chase lightbugs in the spray, while the sun set somewhere past the mountain-trees and the green twilight deepened toward darkness. The whole court felt tense and uneasy. From what Moon understood, either the seed would show that it was ready to be reattached to the tree within the next day or so, or it wouldn't. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Chime said suddenly, "They're choosing a new chief mentor tonight."

That was an uncomfortable thought. The balance of power in the court was already delicate. Moon asked, "Who is it going to be?"

“Probably Heart.”

That was an uncomfortable thought for a different reason. After the fight to escape the Dwei hive, Heart hadn’t been able to put Moon into a healing trance. “But she’s so young.”

“That’s not actually a problem,” Chime said, though he still sounded depressed. “You want someone young, to grow into it. And she still has all the other mentors to help her. Heart is reasonable, and good at settling differences, and Pearl and Jade both trust her. She was Flower’s second... first choice as a successor.”

“The first choice after you,” Moon said, then realized a moment later that he should have withheld that thought.

“But I’m not a choice anymore,” Chime said, sounding less depressed but more exasperated.

“Sorry.”

Chime shook his head. “It’s all right. It’s just... I wish I could help with the seed.”

Moon wished Chime could help, too. He tried to imagine packing the two flying boats again and heading off for some new destination, and it felt like a little stab in the heart. He wanted to stay here.

Stone had been right from the beginning. The court belonged here. And Moon meant to belong here, too.



Late that night, when Moon and Jade were asleep in their bower on the teachers’ level, someone banged loudly on the hanging bed. Moon, closest to the bottom, started awake and Jade rolled off him with a growl. They both leaned over the edge to see Blossom looking up at them expectantly. She said, “It’s the seed! It’s ready!”

Moon realized he could hear a lot of movement and voices out in the passage. Jade gasped, vaulted out of the bed, and bolted out of the room with Blossom. Still half-asleep, Moon climbed out, got his clothes on, and joined the trickle of Arbora moving toward the nearest stairs. Moon passed Nirán, half-dressed and bleary with sleep, his long hair wrapped up in a scarf for the night. “What is it?” Nirán asked.

“They think the seed’s ready,” Moon said as he passed by. “They’re going to try to attach it to the tree.”

“Ahh! Good luck!” Nirán called after him.

Moon followed the others all the way down to the lower level

where the seed's chamber lay. The corridors leading to it were already packed with Arbora and warriors, everyone whispering anxiously. Some had shifted and clung to vantage points on the low ceiling, though Moon didn't think they would have much of a view up there, either. He was standing on tiptoes, trying to get an idea of what was happening, when Balm elbowed her way through the crowd, grabbed him by the wrist, and unceremoniously hauled him back with her through the passage and up to the door of the seed chamber.

Jade was there in a little group with Pearl, Stone, and Chime, and the leaders of the Arbora, Bone, Bell, and Knell. River and Pearl's other warriors crammed into the corridor behind Pearl. Balm deposited Moon at Jade's side, and Jade whispered, "What were you doing back there?"

"I didn't know I was supposed to be up here."

Pearl hissed at them to be quiet and Moon gave up on an explanation.

The door was open and the seed chamber softly lit. From here Moon could see the mentors all in the small room, standing back against the walls. Even Copper, the young mentor-to-be, had been brought from the nurseries. He stood next to Merit and clung to the older mentor's leg. Heart knelt in the center of the room, holding the seed.

It was easy to see how they had known the seed was ready. The hard outer husk had softened and was now covered with soft white petals. Another female mentor crouched beside Heart, holding a sketch that they compared the seed to. "It looks right," the other mentor muttered. "It should be sprouting."

"I think I feel tendrils," Heart said, gently lifting one of the petals. She looked back at Stone. "Should we try?"

Stone shrugged, not helpfully. Pearl said, "Just go ahead."

Heart took a deep breath and set the seed carefully into the cradle in the center of the web of dried and broken tendrils. Moon realized he was holding his breath along with everyone else.

Heart said, "I think now we just have to wait. It's bound to take time to— Everyone, out!"

As the mentors scrambled to get out of the room, Moon fell back with Jade and the others to make space for them in the foyer. As the last mentor hopped out of the chamber, Moon saw that the seed had sprouted new white tendrils. They snaked out and twined around the crumbling remnants of the dead tendrils to follow their path into the

heartwood. The tension ran out of Moon's body and he leaned back against the wall, letting his breath out. *That's it*, he thought. The seed was alive and well and back in its place.

"It worked," Chime said, his voice trembling, and the word passed through the crowded passages, a growing murmur of relief.

Stone pushed the chamber door closed, and said, "Well, we're home now."

Appendix I

The Court of Indigo Cloud and Associated Raksura Aeriats

Queens

Pearl—Reigning Queen

Jade—Sister Queen

Amber—former Sister Queen, now dead

Azure—the queen who took Stone, now dead

Frost—a fledgling queen of the court of Sky Copper, now adopted by Indigo Cloud

Consorts

Stone—line-grandfather

Rain—Pearl's last consort, now dead

Moon—Jade's consort

Thorn and Bitter—fledgling consorts of Sky Copper, now adopted by Indigo Cloud

Warriors

River—leader of Pearl's faction of warriors. A product of one of Amber's royal clutches.

Drift—River's clutchmate

Branch—River and Drift's clutchmate, killed in a Fell ambush

Root—young warrior from an Arbora clutch, a member of Jade's faction

Song—young female warrior, a member of Jade's faction

Spring—fledgling female, one of only two survivors from Amber's last clutch of warriors

Snow—fledgling male, Spring's clutchmate

Balm—female warrior, and Jade's clutchmate. Jade's strongest

supporter and leader of her faction.

Chime—former Arbora mentor, now a warrior, a member of Jade’s faction

Vine and Coil—male warriors of Pearl’s faction, though they chafe under River’s authority

Floret—female warrior of Pearl’s faction

Sand—a young male warrior of Jade’s faction

Sorrow—female warrior who took care of Moon as a fledgling, killed by Tath Arbora

Mentors

Flower—leader of the Mentor Caste

Heart—young female mentor, one of the Arbora rescued from the Dwei Hive by Moon

Merit—young male mentor, rescued with Heart

Copper—a young male mentor, still in the nurseries

Teachers

Petal—former leader of the Teachers’ Caste, killed in the Fell attack on the old Indigo Cloud colony

Bell—new leader of the Teachers’ Caste, and clutchmate to Chime

Blossom—an older female, one of only two teachers to escape during the Fell attack on the colony. Later learned to pilot a Golden Isles Wind-ship.

Bead—a young female, she escaped the colony with Blossom

Rill, Bark, and Weave—female teachers

Gift, Needle, and Dream—young female teachers, rescued from the Dwei Hive by Moon

Snap—young male teacher, also rescued from the Dwei Hive

Hunters

Bone—leader of the Hunters’ Caste

Braid, Salt, Spice, Knife—male hunters

Bramble—a female hunter

Strike—a very young male hunter, who volunteered to test the Fell poison

Soldiers

Knell—leader of Soldiers' Caste, and clutchmate to Chime Grain—the first Arbora to speak to Moon and to order him to leave Indigo Cloud

Shell—Grain's clutchmate, killed in the Fell attack on the colony

Appendix II

Excerpt from:

Observations of the Raksura: Volume Thirty-Seven of a Natural History by scholar Pre-emlnent Delln-Evran-IIndel

The Two Breeds of the Raksura

ARBORA : Arbora have no wings but are agile climbers, and their scales appear in a variety of colors. They have long tails, sharp retractable claws, and manes of flexible spines and soft “frills,” characteristics that are common to all Raksura. They are expert artisans and are dexterous and creative in the arts they pursue for the court’s greater good. In their alternate form they are shorter than Aeriats Raksura and have stocky, powerful builds. Both male and female Arbora are fertile, and sometimes may have clutches that include warrior fledglings. This is attributed to queens and consorts blending their bloodlines with Arbora over many generations.

The four castes of the Arbora are:

Teachers —They supervise the nurseries and train the young of the court. They are also the primary artisans of the court, and tend the gardens that will be seen around any Raksuran colony.

Hunters—They take primary responsibility for providing food for the court. This includes hunting for game and gathering wild plants.
Soldiers—They guard the ground and protect the colony and the surrounding area.

Mentors —They are Arbora born with arcane powers, who have skill in healing and augury. They also act as historians and record-keepers for the court, and usually advise the queens.

AERIAT: The winged Raksura. Like the Arbora, they have long tails, sharp retractable claws, and manes of flexible spines and soft frills.

Warriors —They act as scouts and guardians, and defend the colony from threats from the air, such as the Fell. Warriors are sterile and cannot breed, though they appear as male and female forms. Their scales are in any number of bright colors. Female warriors are

usually somewhat stronger than male warriors. In their alternate form, they are always tall and slender. They are not as long-lived generally as queens, consorts, and Arbora.

Consorts —Consorts are fertile males, and their scales are always black, though there may be a tint or undersheen of gold, bronze, or blood red. At maturity they are stronger than warriors, and may be the longest lived of any Raksura. They are also the fastest and most powerful flyers, and this ability increases as they grow older. There is some evidence to suggest that consorts of great age may grow as large or larger than the major kethel of the Fell.

Queens —Queens are fertile females, and are the most powerful and deadly fighters of all the Aeriats. Their scales have two brilliant colors, the second in a pattern over the first. The queens' alternate form resembles an Arbora, with no wings, but retaining the tail, and an abbreviated mane of spines and the softer frills. Queens mate with consorts to produce royal clutches, composed of queens, consorts, and warriors.

Appendix III

Excerpt from:

Additions to the list of predatory species by scholar-eminent - posthumous-Venar-Inran-all

Fell are migratory and prey on other intelligent species.

The Known Classes of Fell

Major kethel —The largest of the Fell, sometimes called harbingers, major kethel are often the first sign that a Fell flight is approaching. Their scales are black, like that of all Fell, and they have an array of horns around their heads. They have a low level of intelligence and are believed to be always under the control of the rulers.

Minor dakti —The dakti are small, with armor plates on the back and shoulders, and webbed wings. They are somewhat cunning, but not much more intelligent than kethel, and fight in large swarms.

Rulers —Rulers are intelligent creatures that are believed to have some arcane powers of entrancement over other species. Rulers related by blood are also believed to share memories and experiences through some mental bond. They have complete control of the lesser Fell in their flights, and at times can speak through dakti and see through their eyes. (*Addendum by scholar-preeminent Delin-Evran-lindel: Fell rulers in their winged form bear an unfortunate and superficial resemblance to Raksuran Consorts.*)

There is believed to be a fourth class, or possibly a female variant of the Rulers, called the *Progenitors*.

Common lore holds that if a Fell ruler is killed, its head must be removed and stored in a cask of salt or yellow mud and buried on land in order to prevent drawing other Fell rulers to the site of its death. It is possible that only removing the head from the corpse may be enough to prevent this, but burying it is held to be the safest course.

THE SIREN DEPTHS

MARTHA WELLS

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To Troyce Wilson, for believing in me.

Chapter One

“It’s a long way,” Moon said. He walked along the wide expanse of the branch, his heel claws catching in the rough wood. The air was fresh and cool and green-tinged early morning sunlight filtered down through the thick layers of the mountain-tree’s leafy canopy. “I think you’re taking too many Arbora.” He was trying to come up with better objections to the trip, but so far that was all he had.

“I know I’m taking too many Arbora.” Stone was in his groundling form, sitting on the branch, surveying the two flying boats below. “Try telling them that.”

The boats had been tethered to one of the colony tree’s larger garden platforms so they could be loaded more easily. Both were from the Golden Isles, with long graceful hulls made of lacquered wood and sails fan-folded up into the single central masts. Together the two ships had been large enough for the entire Indigo Cloud court to crowd aboard, but on the way back they would carry only four overexcited Arbora, six warriors resigned to their fate, and one impatient groundling.

A small crowd had gathered on the boats and the grassy platforms below the hulls, mostly Arbora carrying provisions aboard or finishing off the last few repairs, or who were saying goodbye to the travelers. Several warriors flew circles around the masts, staying out of the way.

“I can see why you need Blossom,” Moon admitted. Niran, the groundling whose family owned the vessels, had taught Blossom to pilot the smaller ship, the Indala, on the long journey to the Reaches. She would be piloting it again on the longer journey back to the Yellow Sea. Once the two ships reached the Golden Isles and Niran’s family, Stone and the other Raksura would fly back under their own power, the warriors carrying the flightless Arbora. “Why do you need the others?”

“Company for Blossom. And Niran.” Stone unfolded long legs and pushed to his feet. His groundling form was lean and tall, like Moon’s groundling form, like the groundling forms of most Aeriak Raksura. He had one bad eye, partially blinded by a white haze across the pupil, and was so old his skin and hair had faded to gray. He also wore gray, pants and a loose shirt. “And for me. I’m not spending this trip

trapped on those flying baskets with nobody but warriors to talk to.”

Stone was cranky, moody, and had lied to get Moon to follow him across the Three Worlds, and Moon wanted him to leave slightly less than he wanted to lose a wing. They were the only two adult consorts in the court, and Moon needed the company and the reinforcement. And Stone was the closest he had ever had to a father, or a male relative of any kind. And he thought he had succeeded in concealing all that, but one of Stone’s more annoying qualities was his ability to guess what Moon was thinking. Stone glanced at him, amusement in his one good eye, and said, “I won’t be gone that long.”

Before Moon could retort that he didn’t give a piss how long Stone was gone, Stone shifted, dropped off the branch, and spread his wings to glide down toward the flying boats.

Stone’s winged form was huge; tip to tip his wings were more than three times the size of Moon’s twenty pace span. Raksuran queens and consorts grew larger and stronger as they grew older, and Stone was very old. Old and experienced enough to get the boats and Niran to their islands and the Arbora and warriors safely home, Moon reminded himself. He knew all his objections were irrational. And maybe you’re just jealous. Squelching that thought, he dropped off the branch, snapped his wings out, and swept down toward the platform.

On the way down, Moon banked out to catch the spray from the waterfall where it fell from a channel in the mountain-tree’s entrance knothole. The water plunged down to collect in various pools on the wide platforms extending out from the trunk, formed where the tree’s thick branches grew together and intertwined in broad swathes.

Moon circled above the Indala and Valendera where they were tethered near an irrigation pond, rope ladders dangling down from their decks so the Arbora wouldn’t scale the wooden hulls. Sanding out claw marks had been one of the major repairs they had had to make, along with rebraiding ropes and patching tears in the sails. From what he could see, the water casks and food supplies had already been loaded, and the Arbora on the decks mostly just milled around, talking.

Moon spotted Chime near the stern of the Indala and landed lightly in the high grass next to him. Chime ducked as Moon shook the water off his scales, and said grumpily, “Consorts are allowed to sleep late, you know.”

Moon lowered his spines and folded his wings into a compact mass on his back. “I wanted to see them off. What are you doing up this early?” Chime didn’t usually crawl out of his bower-bed until mid-

morning at the earliest. The times Moon had slept with him, he had had to climb over Chime's unresponsive body to get out.

"I wanted to see them off too, but I'm also on patrol today." Chime absently kicked a tuft of grass, annoyed.

Moon was unsympathetic. Patrol meant a day of circling the immediate area under the mountain-tree's canopy, watching for predators and other incursions, not exactly a difficult job. And while it might be dull, at least it was a necessary task. Trying to change the subject, he said, "I'm glad you decided not to go with the ships."

Chime shrugged his spines a little uncomfortably. "After Flower died, I thought I'd better stay here. Maybe I can give Heart advice, at least." He had started out life as an Arbora, a mentor; the pressure of disease and lack of warrior births at the old colony had forced the change to warrior on him. Even after all this time, he still wasn't fully reconciled to it.

Moon said, "Heart can probably use the help." She was the most powerful mentor in the court now, the leader of the caste, since Flower had died two months ago. But she was young, and some members of the court weren't happy with her as chief mentor. Like they weren't happy with a mostly feral solitary with no bloodline as their first consort.

"Maybe I'm a little afraid, too," Chime said, as he looked up at the Indala. The ship moved gently, swayed by the breeze, the light wood creaking. "Our last trip was...a little much. That's as close as I want to come to being eaten by something."

That was putting it mildly. "I don't think this trip will be that bad."

"I hope not. The mentors have been doing auguries, and they haven't seen anything bad, but..." Chime sighed in resignation. "You know that's not always reliable."

Yes, Moon knew that wasn't always reliable.

A last flurry of Arbora leapt or scrambled down off the boats. Blossom and Bead appeared at the railing, saw Moon and Chime, and waved, both of them bouncing with excitement. Moon waved back, though he wished they weren't going either. He liked them, and they both tended to defend him to the other Arbora. He tried not to feel like he was losing some of his best allies and told himself they would only be gone a few months at most.

"Here comes Jade," Chime said.

Moon looked up as Jade banked down from above, the soft vivid

blue of her scales standing out against the gray wall of the mountain-tree's trunk. She headed directly for the Indala's deck.

"I guess Pearl's not coming." Chime watched the knothole, but no one else appeared.

Pearl didn't like groundlings, but it was Moon's opinion that she didn't much like Raksura, either. The Arbora had held a formal goodbye for Niran last night, and Pearl probably considered it all that was necessary.

Moon partly extended his wings and leapt up to land on the railing, careful not to score the newly polished wood with his claws. Chime landed after him and headed down to the stern toward Blossom and Bead.

Jade stood on the deck, speaking to Niran. "I want to thank you again for helping us," she said. "If you hadn't, we would never have made it here." She stood out, even among the brightly colored Arbora crowded around. As a queen she was larger, stronger, with a silver-gray web pattern over her scales. Her mane of frills and spines reached all the way down her back to the base of her tail. Her only clothing was a broad necklace and belt with silver chains linking polished opals.

Niran shook his head, a little self-conscious. He was about the size of an Arbora, but slimly built, with gold-colored skin and long straight white hair. He had distrusted the Raksura at first, but forced proximity and shared danger had brought him a long way since then. He said, "It was my grandfather who insisted on helping you, but I'm glad he did." He waved a hand at the clearing, taking in the mountain-trees, the platforms of the suspended forest, all of the Reaches. "I wouldn't have missed this trip for anything. My only regret is that Grandfather will be furious that he missed it, and undoubtedly take it out on me." He nodded to Moon and added, "And I know he would like to see you again, if you ever return to the east."

"I won't be going back," Moon said. He wasn't happy to see Niran go, either. In the times when life with the court became overwhelmingly strange, it had been good to have a groundling to talk to. But he knew how much Niran missed his family and the Golden Isles. "But thank him for me."

Everyone said their last goodbyes, or in Stone's case, cuffed Moon in the head and said, "Don't do anything crazy while I'm gone."

Moon and Jade retreated to the knothole to watch the boats leave. The Arbora on the platform untied the ropes and both craft lifted easily into the air. Their sails didn't expand; the ships were

powered by tiny pieces of rock from the heart of a flying island that allowed them to travel on the lines of force that crossed the Three Worlds. The sails were only for extra speed on windy days. The Valendera floated gracefully off the platform, then turned to find the path through the green caverns of the mountain-tree forest. The Indala followed, its hull scraping a spiral tree on the edge of the platform and its turn just a little jerky. Moon hoped Blossom didn't run into anything on the way out of the Reaches. The path upward through the tree canopies wasn't that far away, and he thought she would do better once she was up in the open air.

That was Moon's last tie to his past, to the groundling world, severed. It should have felt like a relief. Moon wasn't sure what he felt. Which was nothing new, so maybe he shouldn't worry about it.

Jade took Moon's wrist. She looked thoughtful. "Do you wish you were going?"

Startled and guilty, Moon felt himself flush. "No," he said. "Why would you think that?"

She shook her head, and watched the boats slowly vanish into the dim light and mist of the forest. "You've always traveled so much. Is it hard to stay in one place?"

"No, it's not hard. It's just...different." Moon didn't think staying in one place would be the problem.



Three Changes of the Month Later

Moon had, at several points since they arrived at the new colony, asked various people exactly what consorts were supposed to do, besides be mated to a queen to produce royal clutches and infertile warriors for the court. The fact that no one seemed to have a straight answer wasn't encouraging.

When he asked Chime, they were out watching over the Arbora hunters, who were stalking game on the platforms of the suspended forest. The court was still unsure of all the dangers in this new place, and it was much safer to have a group of warriors keep watch when the hunters were focused on their prey, while the soldiers stayed behind to guard the platforms and entrances of the colony tree. Since Aeriats, especially royal Aeriats, didn't normally hunt, Moon was technically supposed to be just along for the exercise, even though he had more experience with hunting and being stalked than all the

warriors put together.

Moon had been able to help a little with the warriors' other new duties, like exploring Indigo Cloud's new territory and helping the hunters make detailed maps of the platforms and the connecting bridges between them. They were also noting predators and all the different types of grasseaters and where they ranged, which were abundant and made good staple prey, and which were scarce and better left alone to increase over long periods.

Answering his question, Chime said, "Consorts are supposed to listen to the Arbora, any concerns they have, or things they aren't happy about, and try to gently point it out to the queens."

Perched near them, Balm said, wryly, "It helps if they listen to the warriors, too."

"Of course," Chime said, as if that was self-evident. Then ruined it by adding, "But warriors' concerns are too frivolous to worry about."

Balm eyed him. "So who cares what warriors think?" Balm was Jade's clutchmate, one of the female warriors sometimes born to queen's clutches. Having been a warrior all her life, her perspective was somewhat different than Chime's.

Moon rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the platform, feeling the conversation had gone off on a tangent that would make it difficult if not impossible to return to the original subject. The afternoon was warm and the air so damp it might as well be raining, the light dim through cloud cover somewhere high above the leafy canopy. From the branch they had a view across to the platform about two hundred paces below, where the Arbora hunted.

It was a huge surface, spiraling halfway around the enormous bulk of a mountain-tree, heavily forested with a stream of runoff falling down onto the smaller platforms nestled in the branches below it. Moon could catch occasional flashes of color from the Arbora's scales as they climbed and leapt among the thick greenery. Arbora might be smaller than Aeriats and lack wings, but in their shifted forms they were scaled and powerfully muscled, and their teeth and claws were just as sharp. Unfortunately, the suspended forest was just as rife with predators as it was with grasseaters.

Moon wasn't as worried about the forested hunting ground as he was the platform directly below it. It was overshadowed and overgrown with bulbous white vines with dark purple leaves, concealed by drifts of mist. What little he could see looked dangerous and Moon thought all it needed were piles of bones along its rotting edges.

Balm was saying, "If you don't listen to the warriors it just causes more problems with the young males—"

Chime snorted in a derisive way that was an invitation for Balm to hit him. "Warriors complain a lot. Much more than Arbora. If you listen to them you wouldn't have time for—"

"All you people complain more than anybody else I've ever met," Moon said, "with less reason." He had tried to keep his opinions on running the court to himself, because there was nothing he knew less about than managing a Raksuran colony. And he thought Jade did a good job of keeping an eye on the Arbora and the warriors. He had no intention of butting in and causing trouble by repeating "concerns" unless he knew a lot more about the situation.

Chime stiffened in offense, but Balm laughed. "It's probably true."

Moon nudged his shoulder against Chime's. "It was a joke."

"It was not." But Chime settled his ruffled spines anyway. "Oh, speaking of complaining, there was something I wanted to let you know. I heard some of the others talking: they're worried that Stone won't come back."

Moon frowned, startled. "Why wouldn't he come back?"

Balm said, "He's been gone a lot over the last twenty turns or so. He was gone more than he was at the old colony." She shrugged her folded wings, her expression thoughtful. "I don't know, but I think that was one of the reasons things got so bad. For example, if he was there, I don't think Pearl would have sent Dust and Burn off to other courts."

Moon didn't comment. Dust and Burn were the young consorts who had belonged to Amber, the sister queen who had died before Moon had come to the court. If they had still been there, Jade would have been able to take one of them and there would have been no need for Stone to go on the trip to Star Aster to ask for a consort, which had led him to find Moon.

"So, since we're settled here now, there's been some talk that he might leave again," Chime finished. He turned to Moon, his brow scrunched in worry. "What do you think?"

Moon rippled his spines, hoping he was conveying unconcern. One of the things he had finally figured out over the past few months was that while he could read Raksuran body language fine, his own didn't quite match theirs and didn't always mean what he thought it did. Realizing this had explained at least some of his problems fitting into the court. "Stone didn't sound like he wasn't coming back." And

Moon had had the strong impression that Stone was ready to settle down. "He's wanted to come to the Reaches for a long time; I don't think he was planning to leave any time soon."

"That's good." Chime settled his spines, then said, reluctantly, "Of course, River said—"

Balm hissed in disapproval. "Chime, no one cares what River said."

Moon could guess what this was about. "I'd rather not be blind-sided." River was Pearl's favorite warrior, and the leader of her faction. Like Balm, he was a warrior from a royal clutch; in River's case, it had given him an attitude. It had been made worse by the fact that Pearl, for some unfathomable reason, had decided to sleep with him.

After the trip back from the freshwater sea, Moon had been hoping River would be reconciled to his existence. He hadn't been. If anything, their relationship was worse, since Moon had realized that River wasn't just making trouble, he really did honestly think Moon was a terrible consort and bad for the court.

Balm's face was grim. Chime flicked his spines at her and said, "It's ridiculous, but River said Stone was going to use the trip to the Golden Isles as a way to look for another consort." Looking at Moon, Chime's expression turned guilty. "It's not true, of course. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"That's why I told you not to," Balm said.

Chime hissed at her. Moon said, "It's all right. I would have heard it sooner or later."

Chime still looked uneasy. "I just—"

A distant shriek made Moon's spines flare. He went still and scanned the platform.

"That was an Arbora," Chime whispered, shocked. "Someone's hurt."

Balm shushed him. Then she said, "There! See it?" an instant before Moon spotted the thrashing in the undergrowth, near the center of the wooded platform. He sprang off the branch, snapped his wings out and dropped toward it, hard flaps speeding his way.

Balm and Chime were right behind him. Several other warriors dropped off various branches and vantage points to converge on the spot.

Moon dove on the platform and saw the flicker of scales through

the trees and undergrowth as Arbora ran toward the disturbance. From the way the trees swayed and thrashed, whatever they were fighting in there was huge.

Then Balm called to him, "Moon, stay back! Let us handle it!"

Moon swallowed a growl but broke off, letting the others go in first. But he swept around in a tight circle, cupped his wings to slow down, and dropped into the branches of a spiral tree. He climbed down until he had a view of the fight.

He saw a hole in the platform floor, surrounded by clumps of dirt and grass and torn roots. Something was inside it, visible only as white tentacles a good twenty paces long. They had clawed tips, striking and slashing at the warriors and Arbora who dodged and struck back. The creature had one struggling Arbora in its grip, and two others lay sprawled on the ground nearby.

As the warriors attacked, two Arbora closed in, armed with the short spears they used to augment their own claws for hunting. They stabbed at the tentacle that held the captive hunter. The warriors swooped in from above to strike at it. Balm ripped one tentacle open with her foot-claws. Chime tried a similar strike, missed, and almost had an aerial collision with Sage, but it still helped distract the creature.

The warriors tore at it and the creature seemed to realize it was badly outnumbered. It tossed the hunter away and pulled its tentacles back into its lair. That's a relief, Moon thought. The thing looked as if it would be nearly impossible to fight in that defensive position. Now they just needed to retrieve the wounded and get out of here.

The Arbora grabbed the unconscious hunters and retreated as the creature sunk rapidly down into its hole. Then one tentacle snapped out, snatched a warrior out of the air, and yanked him down just as the creature disappeared underground. Moon gasped in dismay.

With a chorus of shocked cries and angry growls, everyone charged the opening.

That's not going to work, Moon thought. They couldn't possibly retrieve the warrior without losing half the others. Unless...These platforms weren't thick enough for an underground nest for something that large, and they were mostly roots. If that's not a lair, it's a tunnel.

He scrambled back up the tree, sprang into the air, and headed for the edge of the platform. Someone shouted behind him but he couldn't stop to explain. If he was right, he would only have a few moments to catch the creature.

He reached the edge and dove down, past the exposed roots jutting out from the side, and swung in to land on the platform fifty paces below. The white vines stretched up over his head, filling the damp air with a scent like sweet rot; the purple leaves cut off what little light there was. He scanned the underside of the platform above and spotted the torn roots and moss bundles hanging down where the creature had tunneled up through the forest platform to attack the Arbora. Ha, I was right. And he could hear something thrashing in the vines in that direction.

Moon tore through the thick vegetation, relying on speed and surprise to protect him from whatever else lived here, and headed toward the sound.

It cut off abruptly and Moon knew the creature had heard him. He crouched and sprang up, two flaps taking him high enough to catch hold of the mass of twisted roots that formed the underside of the upper platform. The creature might be able to spot him, but the vantage point gave him a view of the vine surface.

Dirt clumps fell down the tunnel opening, and warriors and Arbora yelled at each other somewhere above. But below it, and as far as he could see, the vines were completely motionless. Moon hissed in frustration. The creature had to be here somewhere; it hadn't had time to dig down through to another platform.

He sensed movement near him and looked up with a snarl. A tree frog nearly twice his size huddled in the roots barely ten paces away, staring at him with wide frightened eyes.

Moon had never tried to talk to a tree frog before, but it was worth a try. In Raksuran, he said, "Where is it?"

It might not have understood the language, but it had seen enough of the situation to get the idea. It pointed to a spot about thirty paces south of the tunnel opening.

Moon didn't hesitate, swinging across the root mass until he was above the spot. He caught a flash of slick white skin, too iridescent to be one of the vines, and dropped for it.

He crashed through the flowers into purple-tinged darkness and landed on something hard that writhed and snarled in fury. Moon sunk his claws in and yelled for help. He thought he heard a hoarse echo that sounded like Chime, then shouts from the Arbora. Then a tentacle whipped down and wrapped around his waist, and Moon stopped paying attention to anything else.

It dragged him off the creature's body, slammed him into the

rotting moss, and started to squeeze. Stunned, Moon curled around it and sunk his teeth into the dense flesh. The creature must not have been expecting that much resistance because he felt its body jerk. The tentacle under him flailed and tried to slam him down again.

Moon bit through a vein filled with some of the worst-tasting blood he had ever encountered, then felt another tentacle slap down and grab his leg. He had an instant to think, Oh, this is going to be bad. Then he heard a chorus of snarls and wingbeats as the rest of the warriors arrived in an angry rush.

The tentacle flung Moon aside. He hit the ground hard and rolled, then staggered up to see tentacles flailing as the creature tried to flee. Warriors landed on the body, and several big Arbora leapt through the vines after it.

Moon spat out blood, decided the others could finish the creature off, and started to tear through the crushed vines, looking for the warrior. He found the crumpled body a short distance away. It was Sand, a young warrior of Jade's faction. He was unconscious, shifted to his groundling form, but still breathing.

Chime crashed through the vines as Moon gently felt Sand's ribs to see how bad the breaks were. His own chest hurt and his ribs ached, so he knew Sand had to be badly off.

"You're alive! He's alive!" Chime shouted, waving to the Arbora who climbed out of the tunnel in the platform above. "Moon got Sand, and they're both alive!"

"Chime, Chime, take a breath," Moon said, his voice coming out hoarse.

Sand's eyelids fluttered and he groaned, then gasped, "What happened?"

"Nothing. We'll tell you later." Moon eased down into a sitting position. "Just lie still." He asked Chime, "Were the Arbora all right?"

Chime nodded, stepping through the crushed vines to crouch next to Sand. "Three of them are hurt, but nobody's dead." He touched Sand's forehead and frowned in concentration. Watching his face, Moon saw the moment when he remembered again that he wasn't a mentor and couldn't put Sand in a healing trance. Chime winced and drew his hand back, and Moon looked away.

After a moment, Chime said, "I hate hunting."



Nobody had been eaten, so Moon was counting it as a pretty good

day. The warriors transported the wounded, the Arbora, and their kills to the colony. Moon went back with the first group. He managed to slip away from the storm of exclamations, explanations, and recriminations that immediately erupted in the greeting hall and flew up the central well to the queens' level.

No one was out in the queens' hall, which was a relief. It was a big chamber, the far side looking out into the colony tree's central well, with the open gallery of the consort level above it. There was a fountain against the inner wall, falling down into a shallow pool, and above it a huge sculpture of a queen. Her outspread wings stretched out across the walls to circle the entire hall, finally meeting tip to tip. Her scales, set with polished sunstones, glinted faintly in the soft light of shells mounted on the walls that were spelled to glow. He heard muted conversation from the direction of Pearl's bower and quickly took the passage that led into Jade's.

At first, Jade hadn't wanted to move up here, feeling that the bower near the teachers' hall that she and Moon had shared when they first arrived was more convenient. But when visitors from other courts started to appear, it would look as if Indigo Cloud was far worse off than it actually was if the royal bowers were empty. These chambers held what Moon thought was some of the best carving in the colony and had their own hot bathing pool.

The heating stones in the metal bowl hearth radiated warmth, and Moon leaned down to put the kettle on. His ribs twinged, pain spreading up from his waist to his chest, and he winced. He shifted to groundling, then carefully pulled up his shirt to look at the damage.

He already had some bruises, black and purplish against the dark bronze of his groundling skin, but he didn't think anything was broken. But climbing up into the bed, a big wooden half-shell suspended from the ceiling, might be out for tonight. He could make do with sleeping on the furs and cushions near the hearth.

Then Jade slammed in from the passage and hissed at him. "You could have gotten killed."

Or maybe he wouldn't be sleeping in this bower at all. "We don't live in a safe place, Jade. We all might get killed."

She didn't like that answer. Her head tilted. "So maybe we should avoid throwing ourselves on top of predators. Alone. Without waiting for help."

"There wasn't time." Moon grimaced and managed to pull his shirt off over his head. "You've told me—twice!—to go after Fell—"

“The first time, I didn’t expect you to actually attack a cloud-walker, and the second time, I told you to follow the kethel, not personally invade the Fell flight.”

Moon had been scouting, not invading, but he didn’t bother to mention that. “I don’t see your point.”

Jade’s first burst of anger was already fading to exasperation. “My point is that you are the first consort. My first consort. You can’t afford to risk yourself.”

“I’m not going to stand by and let someone get eaten.”

“I know. I know you’re not.” She pressed her hand to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. “But...you have other responsibilities.”

Other responsibilities, like fathering a clutch. Moon waited, his heart pounding, for her to bring that up.

Jade had decided three months ago, after the flying boats had left, that they should have a clutch, but nothing had happened yet. Moon was doing his part at every opportunity, so he had no idea what was wrong. And he found himself extremely reluctant to ask Jade if she had changed her mind.

He had also wondered if having a clutch was harder than he had supposed. He had seen groundlings have babies, but never another Raksura; he hadn’t even been sure if they had live births or eggs, and he hadn’t known that queens and Arbora females could control their fertility. Because of the problems at the old colony, all of the Arbora had stopped clutching long before Moon had gotten there, and the youngest babies had been nearly a turn old. But if there was something he was doing wrong, he was certain Jade would have pointed it out.

At one point another possible answer had occurred to him, but since Stone had already left with Niran and the others, there was no one to ask about it.

Jade looked at him and must have sensed his agitation. She shifted to her Arbora form, the closest equivalent that queens had to a groundling form. Her whole body softened to look like an Arbora’s, and her wings vanished. She had the same blue and silver-gray coloring but fewer spines, and more long frills in her mane. She stepped close, put her hand on the back of his neck and pressed her forehead to his. She said in a growl, “I understand that you had to help. Just don’t get yourself killed.”

Moon closed his eyes, breathing in her scent. “I realized where it

was taking Sand, and there was no time to tell anyone else. I had to go.”

She stepped back. “No one died; I’m satisfied with that.” She eyed him. “I’m going to get a mentor to see to you.”

Moon sat down on the furs, trying not to yelp when his abused muscles contracted. He didn’t need a mentor, but he was too relieved that they weren’t going to talk about clutches or his inability to provide them to argue. “Is Pearl going to give you trouble about this?”

Heading for the passage, Jade made an eloquently derisive noise. “I can handle Pearl.”

Moon lay back on the furs, squinting at the ceiling overhead, considering his favorite carving. It depicted a whole court of Raksura, in different woods and set with polished gemstones. Queens in the center, larger than the others, and consorts next, with a darker wood used to represent their black scales, then clusters of male and female warriors, bodies twined or wings flared in flight. The outer edge was Arbora, wingless, stocky, and muscular where the Aeriats were slender. The artwork everywhere in the mountain-tree never showed Raksura in their soft-skinned groundling forms, something else Moon didn’t understand. Even though he had grown up alone, outside of a Raksuran court, he had known in his blood that both his forms were him, that he didn’t belong in one body or the other but both.

You’re still here, he reminded himself. Considering his past record at trying to fit in to settlements, this was an achievement.

Chapter Two

Two days later, the queens called for a formal augury.

Moon was still getting used to the vagaries of Raksuran behavior, but even before the augury started he had already gotten into trouble with Chime by making a comment implying that it was just a way to shift blame for important decisions onto the mentors.

“No, this kind of augury is very accurate, and very important to the court,” Chime insisted, too loudly.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t.” Moon couldn’t help glancing around to see if anyone else had heard.

They were in an anteroom on the edge of the cavernous greeting hall, which at the moment held almost every member of the court. Arbora and warriors gathered on the main floor and lined the two open stairways that criss-crossed up the far wall, below the balconies and the round doorways opening into the higher levels. Above the staircases, the huge well wound up in a big spiral through the tree.

Almost everyone was in their groundling forms, though several younger warriors kept their wings and clung to the walls or hung from the balconies by their foot-claws or tails. Only the children in the nurseries, and a few teachers who had stayed there to watch them, were missing. There was a low hum of conversation, some jostling among the warriors and younger Arbora, and an air of anticipation and impatience. But even with almost everyone present, there was still plenty of space in the greeting hall: a reminder of how small the Indigo Cloud court was now compared to its former glory.

Unappeased, Chime persisted, “So what’s wrong? Why do you think this is a bad idea?”

Moon hissed, annoyed. “I don’t think it’s a bad idea.” He just didn’t think it was a good way to solve this problem.

And he was worried about what else the augury might reveal.

“But then why—” Chime began, when Balm gave them both a prod from behind and said, “Come on, Jade’s waiting.”

Jade was waiting, sitting at the edge of the clear circle in the center of the hall, radiating impatience. Moon started toward her, and

Chime and Balm followed.

The hall had been an impressive enough sight when they first arrived at the tree, but was even better now that the wood and inlay had been cleaned and polished, all the shells spelled to glow with soft light, and the moss scrubbed off the walls. The narrow column of water that streamed out of a high channel and fell to the pool in the floor was now clean and sweet.

Jade looked up at their approach, smiling briefly though the angle of her spines said she was somewhat annoyed. She said, “You look nervous.”

The warriors around her made way, and Moon took a seat on the floor behind her. He was nervous, though he didn’t want to talk about it. As a distraction, he said, “Chime is trying to make everyone think I don’t want the augury.”

Jade leaned back to give Chime a look as he and Balm took seats behind Moon. Chime said, “I am not. I was just asking—”

Balm poked him again. “Ask later.”

Heart waited in the center of the hall with Merit, the next most powerful mentor, both in their groundling forms. Heart was lovely, with the dark amber skin and bronze-colored hair common among the Indigo Cloud Arbora. Though the two were close in age, Merit had always looked and sounded younger, with wide-set eyes, warm brown skin and fluffy light-colored hair. Inexperience and a somewhat frivolous turn of mind had caused him to be passed over for the position of chief mentor. From what Moon could tell, he seemed more relieved by that than anything else. Heart looked nervous now, and kept rubbing her hands on her light-colored skirt, as if her palms were sweaty. There were many different ways to augur, and he wondered if it was the first time she had done one like this. Or at least done it in front of so large an audience.

Waiting at her feet was a large shallow bowl made of marbled green-gray stone. It might have some deep ceremonial significance now, but Moon had first seen it used by the Arbora to grind nuts into meal. It was surrounded by a dozen or so much smaller bowls of dark blue glazed pottery.

“Where’s Pearl?” Moon whispered to Jade.

Jade’s tail twitched in irritation. Her impatience with the whole process was ill-concealed, and Moon wasn’t sure of the reason. “She has to make an entrance. Here she comes now.”

Moon glanced up. Pearl, her wings spread, dropped down the

central well.

Pearl wasn't the oldest or largest queen Moon had ever seen, but she was still impressive. Her scales were brilliant gold, overlaid with a webbed pattern of deepest indigo blue. The frilled mane behind her head was like a golden sunburst, and there were more frills on the tips of her folded wings, on the triangle-shape at the end of her tail. Like Jade, she wore only jewelry.

She landed gracefully on the polished wooden floor and folded her wings. Her favorite warriors landed in a half-circle behind her, River, Drift, Coil, Floret, and Sage. Behind him, Moon heard a faint rude snort from Chime, and a rustle as Balm elbowed him in reproof.

Pearl sat down and nodded at Heart. Heart picked up a small bowl and started to stand.

Jade said, "This could be a waste of time without Stone here."

Heart stopped, looked uncertainly from one queen to the other.

Pearl tilted her head in subtle threat. "Nevertheless, we're doing it."

Jade and Pearl had managed to work out a way to rule the court between them that was uneasy at best and violent at worst, but it worked, and that was the important thing. But one point they had been unable to resolve was whether to let the Arbora clutch this season or wait.

All Raksuran warriors were born infertile; only queens and consorts, and Arbora females and males could make clutches. A queen and consort pair like Jade and Moon were expected to produce a few warriors along with the next generation of royal Aeriats, but most of the burden of populating the court fell on the Arbora. Jade had been in favor of letting them produce clutches as early as their first two months here, and it had been Pearl who had wanted to wait until the colony tree's garden platforms had been fully reclaimed and planted. But within the past couple of months, both had reversed their positions.

Jade sat back, her mouth a thin line.

At Pearl's nod, Heart went to her first. She knelt and shifted to her Arbora form. Pearl held out her hand and Heart scratched across the scales of Pearl's palm with her claw. Heart held the bowl out, but no blood welled. Pearl flicked a spine in amusement, and said, "You have to bear down, child."

"Sorry," Heart whispered, embarrassed. There was a rustle and murmur of amusement through the watching crowd, combined with

relief that Pearl had decided to be in a good mood. The Fell influence focused on the court had affected Pearl badly, working on a mind already depressed by the loss of her consort and the other setbacks Indigo Cloud had faced over the turns. Pearl was better than she had been before the court had moved here, but she still hated “trouble.” Which she apparently defined as any member of the court doing anything that caused her to notice they existed.

Pearl took Heart’s claw in her free hand and drew it across her palm again. This time the blood came, and Heart carefully caught a few drops in the little bowl.

Jade held out her hand as Heart stood and came to her. Despite her air of annoyance, Jade managed a smile at Heart as her blood was drawn. It was Moon’s turn next, and Heart drew her claw more gently across his groundling skin.

He watched his blood drip into the little bowl, mingling with Pearl’s and Jade’s, and felt his heart beat a little faster.

Heart might have felt his pulse pound through his hand. She gave him a quick, reassuring smile, then stood to carry the bowl back to the stone vessel waiting at the center of the circle. She shifted to her groundling form as she knelt, picked up a copper ewer, and poured a little water into the bowl. She swirled it gently to mix with the blood, then poured it into the larger stone container.

Merit and a couple of the other young mentors shifted from their groundling forms, took more of the small bowls, and began to move among the other Arbora, bypassing the infertile warriors. Moon wasn’t sure how they decided who to pick, but suspected it had something to do with the different bloodlines in the court. Another Raksuran thing he had no idea about.

After a few moments they carried the bowls back to Heart. She took each, mixed the contents with water, then added them to the stone vessel. That was Moon’s blood, mixing with the blood of the rest of the court, and possibly it should have been a significant moment. Moon just felt nervous.

Heart poured the last bowl, then leaned over the vessel to study the result. Merit and the other mentors joined her, their expressions tense with concentration.

The chamber grew profoundly silent as everyone waited. Jade tapped her claws on her thigh. Moon felt someone breathing on the back of his head and twisted around to find that Chime had risen to a crouch, craning his neck to try to see into the vessel. Moon elbowed him and he reluctantly subsided.

Finally, Heart said, "The signs are favorable for new clutches at the end of this season."

It sounded like good news, and there was a pleased murmur from the watching Arbora. Moon was the only one close enough to hear Jade hiss under her breath. But Heart was frowning, and Merit gave her an uneasy glance. The other young mentors looked confused and uncertain.

Pearl's voice was tightly controlled. "And what else?"

The chamber fell silent again, this time in anxious anticipation. Heart said, slowly, "Someone watches."

Everyone froze. Oh no, Moon thought. Jade's claws stopped tapping. Heart looked up, belatedly realizing the effect those two words had had. "Not the Fell! Not like before. I'm not sure...I don't think this is even about our court. It might be another court we have contact with."

"It might be a shadow of what happened before," Merit said, still concentrating on the bowl. "It's definitely not about us."

"Not the Fell, and not us," Jade repeated, as a wave of relief passed over the court and everyone breathed again. Moon rubbed his forehead and managed not to growl. They hadn't needed that scare, brief as it had been.

Pearl's spines shivered in barely controlled irritation. "Anything else?"

Heart looked into the bowl again and said reluctantly, "There are signs for...some upheaval."

"How much upheaval?" Pearl asked.

Heart shook her head slightly, still studying the swirled pattern of blood and water. "Not...terrible upheaval." There was a nod of agreement from Merit. "But...the course will not be smooth."

Pearl frowned, considering that. Jade said, "That's usual for our court, isn't it?"

There was another stir, this time of amusement. Pearl made a dismissive gesture. "We're still learning to live in this place. Doubtless there will be setbacks."

Bone, the leader of the hunters' caste, added, "And if these upheavals don't interfere with the clutching, then they can't be too difficult to handle."

Bone was old for an Arbora, and his groundling form showed the

signs of age, with white hair and an ashy cast to his dark bronze skin. He was heavily built and had a ring of scar tissue around his neck where something had unwisely tried to bite his head off, testifying to his fighting prowess. He tended to be a calming influence on the court. His opinion carried weight and the fact that neither he nor the queens were worried seemed to reassure everybody.

That signaled the end of the augury, and everyone started to mill around and talk. Jade leaned over to Moon and whispered, "I'm going to talk to Pearl. I still think it would be a bad idea to let them all clutch at once. If we can at least get some of them to hold off for a while—"

"What was that?" Pearl suddenly stood over them. The Arbora and warriors nearby rapidly dispersed, hurried out the passage to the knothole, vanished up or down the stairs, or climbed up to the levels overhead. Chime practically bolted. Balm, after she caught Jade's eye, followed at a more sedate pace.

Jade stood, settled her wings deliberately, and said, "I don't think we should let them all clutch at once."

Pearl cocked her head. "Oh, and you think choosing which ones can clutch now and which will wait isn't going to cause trouble?"

Jade was unimpressed. "I think they're quite capable of choosing for themselves."

Pearl snorted in grim amusement. "Then you're a fool."

Moon thought one solution might be to let the Arbora who wanted to clutch draw lots to see who went first, but he knew enough to keep it to himself until he could mention it to Jade in private. Pearl was more than capable of rejecting any idea that came from him.

Moon had never been sure if Pearl despised him because he was a feral solitary dragged in by Stone when she had been expecting a respectable consort with an important bloodline from Star Aster, or if she just didn't like him. She had at one point suggested that he become her consort instead, though it had been pretty clear to Moon that it had been for the strategic value of having a consort again, not for any personal attraction. At least he hoped so; sometimes, with a Raksuran queen, it was hard to tell.

Jade bared her teeth. "Let's tell the Arbora that you think they're incapable of working it out for themselves and see what they say to that."

Moon felt it likely that the Arbora already knew Pearl's opinion. It wasn't like they hadn't known her all their lives.

Pearl counter-attacked, pointing her claws at Moon. “Your consort hasn’t done his duty by the Arbora yet; is that why you’re not eager for them to clutch? If none of them produce mentors, we’ll know whose fault that is.”

Jade flared her spines. “You don’t know that.”

Moon decided now would be a good time for a strategic retreat, and eased to his feet. Consorts were supposed to sleep with Arbora females in the belief that it helped the Arbora produce warriors and mentors. Moon had female Arbora friends but he didn’t know if they had planned to clutch or if they wanted to risk trying it with his unknown bloodline; asking them seemed like it would be the most awkward thing in the world. And if he couldn’t give Jade a clutch, he doubted he could give one to an Arbora. Trying would just expose his weakness.

Moon crossed the greeting hall, passing the last few Arbora still gathered there, when Heart ducked around a column and said, “Moon, can I talk to you?”

“Sure.” She seemed anxious, and Moon tried not to find that ominous. She might want to tell him something to pass on to Jade. They moved off through a short passage into one of the unused smaller chambers off the greeting hall. “What is it?”

Heart looked up at him. She still smelled of fresh Raksuran blood; when she had shifted to groundling the blood staining her claws had transferred to her fingernails. “The augury...There was something about you. Oh, nothing terrible. It was just that your blood was woven all through the part of the design that indicated an upheaval.”

That...doesn’t sound good. Moon extended his senses, making sure no one was in earshot. He could hear movement and voices in the balcony passages above, but no one seemed to be paying attention to them. He lowered his voice anyway. “What does that mean?”

Heart hesitated. “I think it means that your interest will part from the interest of the court. For a time, anyway. I’m not certain.” Her gaze was worried. “You weren’t...planning to leave, were you?”

That took Moon by surprise. “No. Why would I?”

“Sorry, it’s just—That’s what it looked like.” She shook her head in frustration. “It’s very hard to interpret individual strands in general auguries; Flower always thought it was a mistake to try. And this was an unusual augury anyway, with that intrusion about the watcher.”

“Why didn’t you say anything about it to the others?” Then it occurred to Moon that she might be about to, that she might have

wanted to warn him first.

“It was a personal augury, not one for the court. And...I thought it would just make trouble for you. There was nothing in the augury that indicated danger for the court.” Heart smiled a little wryly. “I don’t want to upset anyone over a minor issue, like a disagreement over something the court will do.”

That was a relief. “Thank you for...telling me.” He had almost said warning me.

“As I said, it’s probably nothing,” Heart told him and slipped away. Moon wished she didn’t sound quite so much as though she was trying to convince herself.

Lost in thought, he started across the chamber. Then a warrior came off a balcony somewhere above in an uncontrolled tumble and landed in front of him. Moon stopped abruptly and shifted by instinct. “Sorry,” the warrior gasped in contrition, sprawled on the floor and looking up at Moon. It was Coil, who was one of Pearl’s younger warriors, though Moon didn’t know him well. “They threw me off the —”

Two more warriors landed nearby, and one pounced forward to pin Coil down. From Coil’s expression of mingled embarrassment and fear, this wasn’t play, at least for him. Annoyed, Moon said, “Get off him.”

The warrior looked up, baring his teeth. It was Band, another member of Pearl’s faction. The one who was looking on with a grin was Fair, his clutchmate. Band said, “Why? We’re just having fun.”

A disproportionate amount of the trouble Moon had had in the court came from the younger male warriors. The female warriors and the older males always seemed able to find unobjectionable ways to spend their free time; the younger males couldn’t manage to.

It also didn’t help that Moon had discovered early on that his patience for being argued with by young male warriors was close to nonexistent. Band’s mocking grin was too much to bear. Moon grabbed Band by the throat and threw him.

Band landed about twenty paces away, sliding across the smooth polished wood of the floor. Coil seized his chance, skittering out of reach. But Fair surged forward and stopped a bare pace away. He had been one of those trapped and wounded during the Fell attack on the old colony, so he would have missed the battle to free the court and other events that might have convinced him that Moon was not exactly a safe or easy target. He snarled, “I wonder how tough you are

without a queen to defend you, solitary.”

Moon stepped forward, closing the distance between them. He said, deceptively calm, “My queen’s not here. Stop wondering.” He had gotten used to having the solitary accusation thrown in his face during almost every disagreement, but he still felt the prickle along his nerves that told him his spines had hardened and lifted, spreading out across his back and up onto his head, out of his mane of frills.

Fair fell back, his spines flicking uneasily, his attempt at intimidation having failed. He said, “I wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

Moon hissed in amusement, and shifted to groundling just to emphasize his point. He stepped past Fair and headed for the stairs at the far end of the chamber. No one was stupid enough to try to leap on him from behind. Unfortunately. A good fight might clear the air.

Moon took the stairs down to the teachers’ hall and the passage to the nurseries. As he stepped through the round doorway carved with baby Arbora and Aeriats, his appearance was greeted with a chorus of squeaks and trills of delight. That made up for a lot of aggravation.



Moon went out with the hunters again the next day, with Balm and Chime and some other warriors. Pearl had made the stipulation that the area be searched first to make sure there were no tentacle creatures.

“As if I wasn’t planning to do that already,” Bone confided to Moon before they left. “The damn thing wasn’t even any good to eat.”

They got back to the tree at dusk, and Moon flew on inside while the warriors were still helping ferry the Arbora and their kills to the tree. As soon as Moon reached the greeting hall, the disturbed state of the colony was obvious. All the warriors who hadn’t come on the hunting trip seemed to be in motion, flying around in the upper levels, and a group of Arbora were in a tense conversation by the fountain pool. Bell, the leader of the teachers’ caste, saw Moon arrive and hurried over to him. Moon demanded, “What is it?” He hadn’t seen anything wrong near the knothole.

Bell was one of Chime’s clutchmates, though their groundling forms didn’t much resemble each other. Bell had dark hair and his skin was more brown than bronze. He said, “We had a visit while you were gone, a queen from Emerald Twilight.”

That could be good or bad, Moon thought. They had traded with Emerald Twilight warriors, but hadn’t had a formal visit from an Emerald Twilight queen since what everyone insisted on referring to

as “the incident” which had occurred on the way back from the forest coast. The augury, with the vision of upheaval and the odd “someone watches” message came to mind; he wondered if the court being watched was Emerald Twilight. “Which queen?”

“Tempest, with five warriors,” Bell told him. “They didn’t stay long and we didn’t even get to see them. They met with Jade and Pearl and Heart up on the queens’ level.”

“They didn’t want to stay the night?” That definitely wasn’t good, at least from Moon’s limited understanding of relations between Raksuran courts. The visitors should have stayed at least until morning and there should have been a special meal for them, put together by the Arbora. And it was also odd that the only Arbora included in the meeting had been Heart; for the other visits, Bell, Bone, and Knell had been there to represent the Arbora castes. Bone had been away leading the hunt, but Bell and Knell were both here. “Uh...Were they not invited to stay?”

Bell’s expression was deeply worried. “I don’t know.”

“Right.” Moon looked up. The warriors wheeling around up in the central well all kept their distance from the queens’ level gallery, clearly not wanting to antagonize the occupants. “I’d better get up there.”

“Good luck,” Bell called after him, as Moon leapt up the wall.

Moon climbed rapidly. As he swung up onto the gallery of the highest warriors’ level, Vine landed beside him and clung to a claw-scarred pillar. Keeping his voice low, he said, “Moon, do you know what happened with the visit?”

“No, I just got back. Weren’t you there?” Vine had fallen a little out of favor with Pearl, but not with Jade, and Moon was surprised he had been left out.

“Nobody was. No warriors, I mean.” Vine glanced out into the well. “Not even River, and he’s not exactly thrilled about it.”

All right, that was odd. River had been Pearl’s favorite so long he thought he was a consort.

“See if you can get them to tell us what happened,” Vine urged as Moon moved away.

Moon ducked through an empty bower, out to an interior passage, then up the smaller stairwell that led past the queens’ level and to the consorts’ quarters. As he passed through the unused rooms, he couldn’t hear any disturbance from below. That might be a good sign. If Tempest had delivered some sort of insult or threat from

Emerald Twilight, he thought Pearl would probably still be ranting about it.

The stairs opened into one of the smaller halls, the walls carved with scenes of Arbora building bridges between platforms in the suspended forest, the mountain-trees towering over them. Stone had told him that this hall was meant to be a private retiring room for consorts, where they could compose themselves before joining any gathering in the larger hall beyond. Moon had thought that sounded pointless, before he had found himself using the room for exactly that purpose when they had entertained visitors from other courts.

The round doorway led to a short turning passage only a few paces long, there to block any direct view from the queens' main hall into the retiring room. It was also great for eavesdropping, to make sure you wanted to join any meeting in the hall before you committed yourself by walking into it, but Moon didn't bother with that now.

Pearl, Jade, and Heart were still here, sitting around on cushions near the large metal bowl hearth. The hearth was filled with heating stones, and the best water kettle and the best tea set the court owned were out, along with a scatter of seating cushions for the absent visitors. So it looked like they had actually intended hospitality, whatever had happened.

And something had happened. Jade faced away from Moon so he couldn't see her expression, but her spines were flared. Heart, in groundling form, seemed dispirited, and Pearl looked grim, her spines twitching in agitation.

As Moon stepped out of the doorway and shifted to his groundling form, Heart was saying, "I just don't think we should—you should—worry before we know for certain. We don't even know—"

Pearl spotted Moon and cut Heart off with a hiss. Startled, Heart lifted her head, saw Moon, and immediately looked guilty.

So I'm not supposed to know what happened, either, Moon thought, crossing the hall toward them. That was a little odd, though at least it meant that Emerald Twilight probably hadn't declared war on them. He took a seat on the cushion next to Jade. She didn't look up. Pearl stared at the hearth. Heart cleared her throat, and said, "How did the hunt go?"

"It was good." Moon wondered how long they could keep this up. They had to know the others would have told him that Tempest had been here. "No trouble this time."

An uneasy silence followed. It was so uneasy, Pearl stirred and

asked, "Did you find the hopper herd Bone keeps talking about?"

Moon admitted, "No, but we found some big lopers."

"Ah." Pearl flicked her spines again, looked at Jade and looked away. "Just as well."

Moon glanced at Jade, then took a good look. She was absolutely rigid with fury.

"Was it about Halcyon?" he blurted, before he realized that might not be the best thing to say at the moment. Halcyon was another sister queen of Emerald Twilight, Tempest's clutchmate. She had attacked them on the way back from the forest coast, as part of a plot to get more power within Emerald Twilight, and Jade had had to fight her. Nothing that had happened afterward had been Indigo Cloud's fault, but Moon had always wondered if Emerald Twilight really believed that.

Jade twitched at the name, then made an effort to unclench her claws. "No. No, it wasn't about her." Her voice was husky, strained. As if she had been snarling at someone, or trying not to.

"What was it about?" Really worried now, Moon put a hand on her wrist. Pearl watched them with a completely opaque expression. Heart hunched her shoulders slightly, as if braced for Jade's response.

Jade let out her breath and forced her spines to relax. She managed an apologetic smile and reached over to squeeze Moon's wrist. "It was about territory, they were just trying to push us, make us react. It was stupid; I let Tempest make me angry, we almost..." She added, "It was nothing."

Moon hesitated. If he had had the slightest inclination to believe this, Pearl's ironic expression and Heart's furtive twitch would have squashed it. His first impulse was to think it was something about him, but he knew he was overly suspicious. Actually, overly suspicious was putting it mildly. And he couldn't think what it would be, unless Tempest had tossed off some casual insult that had caught Jade at the wrong moment. Though that didn't seem to fit Pearl's reaction. Whatever it was, he had the feeling it wouldn't help to press the point, at least not now.

And he could always get Chime to try to ease the truth out of Heart, later.

Moon said, "All right." He added, "You should get something to eat."

"I should," Jade agreed. She tightened her grip on Moon's wrist and stood, hauling him to his feet. She met Pearl's gaze with a look of

pure steel-eyed hate. “We’ll talk later.”

Pearl rippled her spines in a shrug, resigned and amused. “For all the good it will do.”



Over the next few days, Jade and Pearl continued to say nothing about what had happened during the meeting with Tempest. Chime reported that Heart refused absolutely to tell him or anyone else what had been said. When Chime had asked her the first few times, she had said only that the queens didn’t want her to discuss it. When he had kept asking she had growled at him that it was none of his damn business and if he asked her again she was going to rip his frills out. “You could ask Balm,” Moon had pointed out.

“You can ask Balm,” Chime had retorted. “She can’t kill you.”

Yes, Moon supposed asking Balm to violate Jade’s confidence wouldn’t go over well. If Jade had even told Balm what had happened. Moon gave up on ever knowing. Maybe it had been nothing, just an exchange of insults that both queens would eventually get over. And it was only a day later that something happened that put the whole incident right out of his mind.



One of the good things Moon had discovered was that teaching fledglings was acceptable work for consorts, and he thought he was fairly good at it. Though he would feel a lot better about his efforts if he could just get Bitter to fly.

Moon nudged Bitter with an elbow, nodding toward two young warriors as they dove past, their wings slanted back for maximum speed. “That doesn’t look like fun?” By this point, he already knew the answer; he just wanted Bitter to know he hadn’t given up asking.

Chewing on a piece of hard yellow fruit, Bitter just shook his head.

It had turned into another warm day, bright sunlight falling through the heavy canopy of leaves high above. Moon and Bitter sat out on one of the mountain-tree’s smaller branches, an expanse of rough gray wood twenty or so paces across. They had a good if oblique view of the giant knothole, the waterfall, and the multiple levels of garden platforms.

Bitter’s clutchmates, Frost and Thorn, fledgling queen and fledgling consort, flew in the waterfall’s spray, dipping and wheeling in the cool air currents off the rush of falling water. A few warriors were also in the air, most further out over the clearing formed by the

tree's giant canopy, some on watch, others just stretching their wings.

Bitter eyed all the fliers noncommittally. He was small for a fledging his age, his groundling form a thin little boy with dark bronze skin, dark hair, and grave eyes, dressed in a brown shirt and pants a little too big for him. He didn't talk either, except in whispers to Frost and Thorn, but at least he could talk if he felt like it. He apparently didn't feel like flying at all.

"You're going to have to do it some time," Moon pointed out. He didn't want to press the issue, but it would have been nice to have a clue as to what the issue was. Bitter liked to fly with Moon, clinging to his chest, so it wasn't a fear of height or fast motion. It had to have something to do with the destruction of the court of Sky Copper. Bitter, Frost, and Thorn were the only survivors, rescued from their Fell captors and brought to join the court of Indigo Cloud. It had been a traumatic and terrible event for the three fledglings, but Moon wasn't sure how that had evolved into Bitter's refusal to learn to fly.

Bitter leaned on Moon's arm and sighed, apparently weary of Moon's wrongheaded persistence on this point.

A large number of Arbora were out on the platforms, digging or weeding in the gardens, probably discussing their plans to clutch. Most were teachers or hunters, the ones in their groundling forms dressed for muddy work in cloth smocks or leather kilts. An Arbora had been making his way down the branch toward them for some time, collecting balls of moss fallen off the higher branches that could be dried and used in weaving. His scales were green faded to gray in large patches, and heavily scarred in spots. As he reached them, he said, "Hello, consort. Hello, little one." It was Dash, a very old Arbora, who wasn't doing particularly well in his old age. He had been ill in the various sicknesses that had plagued the old colony, and injured in fighting the Fell, and it had all taken a toll. He put his bag aside and sat down beside Moon and Bitter, grunting as his bones creaked. "Now, which one are you?" he asked Moon.

"Moon, Jade's consort," Moon reminded him. Dash remembered the distant past better than recent events, and he tended to confuse Moon with the long-gone consorts who had died or been sent away to other courts turns ago.

"Ah, that's right, you're new." Dash stared downward, frowning. "What are they doing down there? In that pool."

Moon leaned forward to look. A few hundred paces below, some Arbora were working on a small platform, close enough to the waterfall to be drenched by its spray. They were digging out an old

drainage pool and channel that had been choked with dirt and weeds. Moon said, "Trying to get it working again. It's probably got something to do with the blocked drains."

The drains and water channels inside the tree had been one of the biggest problems in getting the colony livable again. The mountain-tree drew so much water up through its roots that it expelled it in springs. Some of it was discharged through the waterfall, but the channels carved through the tree also used it to fill the bathing pools and to flush out the latrines into the roots. But generations of disuse had left many of the channels clogged; there was a whole group of Arbora who had done nothing for all the past months except trace the channels throughout the enormous space and hunt down the obstructions. It was all they talked about, and everyone had learned to be careful which levels of the bowers to avoid if you didn't want to hear about drains. And no one wanted to hear about drains.

Moon whistled sharply for Frost and Thorn to call them to the branch. They probably needed a nap by now, and he wanted to be able to make a quick escape if Dash wanted to talk about drains.

Frost and Thorn wheeled toward the branch and landed next to Dash. "We're hungry," Frost announced.

"Say hello to Dash," Moon reminded her. The teachers had told him that fledgling queens could be difficult to raise, but Frost seemed to be taking that to an extreme. She had good days and bad days, and on the bad days she threw fits, she panicked the other young Arbora and Aeriats with wild claims, and was rude to an extent that had even managed to mildly shock Stone.

Much of Frost's misbehavior had to come from the terrible experience of seeing her court destroyed. And if anyone should be able to understand that and handle her, it was Moon. At least, that was the theory, and she had been better since things had settled down in the court and he was able to spend more time with her. The trick seemed to be to get her to behave without squashing the natural aggression she would need to be a good queen.

Jade had also been visiting the fledglings frequently, though at first, Frost had regarded her with suspicion. Just what she was suspicious of, Moon didn't have a clue. But recently, Frost had started to seem more curious than wary, watching Jade play with the young Arbora and other fledglings and occasionally joining in.

But this was apparently going to be a good day, because Frost said, "Hello, Dash," obediently enough, and climbed into Dash's lap by way of apology.

“Hello, Dash,” Thorn echoed, and added, “Frost is hungry; I’m not. I don’t want to go in yet.”

Thorn had been doing better than the other two, but he was also better at concealing his feelings. Being pretty good at concealing his feelings himself, Moon found it easy to tell, but he wasn’t certain anyone else had noticed.

“But did they check the underroots?” Dash asked, absently looping an arm around Frost and letting her settle in his lap, though his attention was still on the platform. His scaly brow knit in worry. “It doesn’t look stable to me.”

“It doesn’t?” Moon craned his neck to look down again. Maybe the near end of the platform was slumping a little. But several Arbora were occupied with digging out the channel, and another was at the opposite end of the dry pool, pulling dead vines out of the broken clay, and none seemed worried by it. Moon wondered if they could tell; the slump might not be noticeable unless you were viewing the platform from this angle. He decided to take the kids inside and then fly back over and let the Arbora know—

The Arbora who was digging out the vines yanked at a recalcitrant clump, throwing her entire body into it. The vines came loose in a spray of dirt and she sat down hard. A crack sounded from below, loud enough to startle the Arbora working on the nearby platforms. The nearest patrolling warriors abruptly veered toward the mountain-tree’s trunk.

The Arbora on the slumping platform froze in place, looking down. Then half the platform split off and crumbled away beneath their feet.

Dash made a strangled noise of horror and the fledglings squeaked in alarm. Several Arbora next to the wooden shaft of the drain outlet clung to the torn roots still attached to the branch, as chunks of the clay pool came apart under them. The nearest warriors dove for them, but the female on the far end of the platform flailed as the dirt dissolved around her. She made a wild grab for a big root, and for an instant it supported her, then it jerked loose and sent her tumbling down with the rest of the debris.

The warriors were close enough to get the others, but not her. Moon pushed Bitter and Thorn toward Dash. “Stay with him!” Then he shoved to his feet and dove headfirst off the branch.

Plummeting through the air, Moon had to fight the urge to shift. But as he fell past the crumbling platform, it rained chunks of dirt, clay, and broken roots down on him; he couldn’t extend his wings in

this debris. Without them, he might as well take advantage of his heavier groundling body to fall faster.

Far below the Arbora tried frantically not to fall faster, clawing at the mass of roots unraveling around her.

The last of the debris from above dropped away and Moon shifted. He snapped his wings out for two hard beats, stooping on the Arbora like prey on the wing, and snatched her out of the air. She keened in his ear as she grabbed him, but managed not to sink her claws through his scales. He caught movement above him and twisted instinctively, pulling his wings in. A hillock-sized clump of wood and dirt fell past, barely missing them.

Up by the fallen platform, Moon saw the warriors had retrieved the other Arbora from the platform. Good, they got them all. Watching helplessly while an Arbora fell to his or her death was not something Moon wanted to do, ever.

He twisted around and spread his wings again, angled them back to catch air and slow his fall. Turning the headlong plunge into a glide, he came around toward the waterfall, away from any more falling debris. "You all right?" he asked the Arbora. From her build and dark green scales, he thought she might be Plum, one of the younger hunters. But her face was buried against his chest and he couldn't be sure.

She made a choking noise and nodded. Moon took another swing around, to check where the rest of the debris would fall. The Kek, groundlings who lived among mountain-tree roots, had a village beneath the tree, but it was on the far side of the trunk from here and further out. And the biggest chunks of wood and dirt were hitting the slope of the trunk and disintegrating; none of the debris would make it to the ground in big enough pieces to cause damage to any Kek who happened to be foraging below.

Moon found a draft and rode it up, hoping he hadn't broken any of Plum's ribs. He had tried not to hit her too hard, but he hadn't wanted to risk overshooting her either.

He came up over one of the big garden platforms, where warriors circled overhead and a group had gathered around the other rescued Arbora. Moon swept in to land lightly on the grass, and tried to set his Arbora on her feet. She shifted to groundling, but didn't let go of him.

Chime reached them first, partially extending his wings for a long leap across the platform, over the heads of the Arbora who bounded toward them. "Is she all right?" he demanded, patting Plum's hair anxiously. "Are you all right?"

Plum took a deep breath and managed to unclamp her hands. "Yes, I am." She looked up at Moon. Her eyes were wide and her skin had flushed a dark copper; she looked as if she was about to be sick. "Thank you, Moon. I've never—I've never fallen before—I mean, Sage dropped me once accidentally when we were little, but it was only a few paces—"

The other Arbora reached them, Merit, Bark, and Rill first. With exclamations of relief and sympathy, they coaxed Plum away from Moon and guided her over to sit down.

"It's lucky you were there," Chime muttered, watching them. "I don't think any of the warriors were close enough or fast enough to catch her."

"You're a warrior," Moon pointed out. It still occasionally slipped Chime's mind.

Chime gave him an exasperated look. He hated being reminded. "I know, but I couldn't have caught her."

He might be right; consorts could fly almost twice as fast as warriors, and Plum had been trapped in the falling debris for a good while. But Moon had been close enough to help and there was no point in wondering what would have happened if he hadn't been here. "You didn't 'hear' anything before the platform cracked?"

"No." Chime grimaced. "Still useless."

Since they had returned from the leviathan city months ago, Chime had been having erratic flashes of insight, but it was always about things that they didn't really need to know. He could sometimes tell when a cloud-walker went by overhead, so far above the forest it was invisible even to Raksuran eyes. If Heart put him in a light trance, he could hear deep rumbling voices, which the mentors thought might come from the mountain-trees. But he hadn't been able to augur or predict anything, or tell where dangerous predators were. It was disappointing, but then Chime's strange new senses had been so much help on the leviathan, it seemed like ingratitude to expect more.

Toward the trunk, Moon caught a glimpse of Jade, spiraling down with Balm to examine the place where the platform had given way. Knell, the leader of the Arbora soldiers' caste, was standing on the edge of this platform, waiting for them. Hands planted on his hips, his whole body was expressive of disgruntled disgust. He's right, we didn't need this, Moon thought.

Then Pearl landed nearby, scattering Arbora. She looked around at them and said, "No one's hurt?"

“Everyone’s all right,” Rill told her. “The warriors got them in time. Moon saved Plum.”

Then Pearl focused on Moon. “Where are the fledglings?”

Alarmed, Moon looked up at the branch. But Dash had them, bringing them down the wide path atop the branch toward the climbing ridge along the trunk. Bitter, in his winged form, clung securely to Dash’s neck, and Dash was leading Frost with a firm grip on her wrist. She was craning her neck to watch the activity on the platform, and hanging on to Thorn, who trailed docilely along behind. There was nothing wrong with Dash’s instincts as a teacher, either; Frost was definitely the one most likely to make trouble.

Pearl followed his gaze and her spines twitched, in relief or possibly thwarted irritation. She couldn’t blame Moon for leaving the fledglings with an elderly and respected teacher. Pearl hissed, and looked for the next target. “Knell!”

Knell bounded over to land nearby. His spines carefully flat, he said, “They think it was the water. The channel for the fountain was plugged, but the water inside it was seeping out and wearing away at the platform’s roots.”

“Of course it was.” Pearl turned to look across this platform, then up at the ones nested in the higher branches and dripping roots and vines. “We’ll need to check every platform with a channel, plugged or not.”

Knell was tough, but Moon saw him brace himself as he told her, “Jade and Balm are starting that now.”

But one of the things Moon had learned about Pearl was that she never reacted the way anyone thought she would. Instead of an angry outburst at Jade’s presumption, she confined herself to an ironic snort. She said, “I’ll send warriors to help them.” She glanced around at the Arbora who had gathered to listen. “I want you to keep off the platforms with blocked pools, but are you willing to stay out here and finish the planting?”

Knell looked at the others, taking in their mood. Some looked uneasy or reluctant, but most nodded. Someone in the back said, “I guess now we know what the upheaval in the augury is.”

There were a few murmurs of rueful agreement. Another Arbora said, “We need to get the ripe berries picked on the lower platforms. I don’t think we can afford to waste the day.”

Pearl nodded in acknowledgement. “Work as quickly as you can.” She crouched and sprang into the air, snapped her wings out,

powerful beats taking her up toward the knothole.

Chime let his breath out in relief. “That went better than I expected.”

Moon had to agree. “Are you going to help Jade and Balm?” Chime had a better eye for detail than the average warrior.

Chime nodded absently. “I’d better. I think I’ll start with this platform.”

Knell gave Chime an annoyed glare. “This one doesn’t have a blocked drain.”

“Better safe than sorry.” Chime leapt into the air.

Knell turned to Moon, and said, a little stiffly, “Will you stay out here?” Knell was another of Chime’s clutchmates, but when Moon had first arrived, he had been one of the Arbora who had objected to him joining the court. Even after everything that had happened since, it still seemed to color all their dealings. “It would make the others less uneasy.”

Some of the other Arbora still within earshot were watching Moon anxiously. “It’d sure make me less uneasy,” Spice seconded fervently.

Moon thought they were overestimating his abilities, especially if one of the large platforms collapsed. But it was good to be asked. “I’ll stay,” he said.

Chapter Three

The Arbora worked for the rest of the afternoon, mostly to get the berries picked and the essential planting done. But they also checked over the blocked drainage and irrigation channels for signs of leaks or weakening supports. Working from below, Jade and Balm and the other warriors found several spots that needed attention, enough to know they would have to carefully check every platform on the tree.

Everyone came in at dusk, and after the berry harvest had been stored away, Moon and most of the court ended up sitting in the greeting hall talking over the situation, worrying, and forming and discarding various plans of action. Everyone knew the platform gardens were too important to their survival to lose. The hunting here was good but they still needed the root crops and ground fruit to augment their food supply. They had traded some of the cloth and raw materials brought from the former colony to Emerald Twilight for dried tea and native root seedlings, but they couldn't trade for all the food they needed. Especially after Tempest's aborted visit, when their relations with Emerald Twilight might be even more uncertain than they had been before.

"It might be the fact that the seed was missing for a while," Merit said, when appealed to for his opinion as a mentor. "The damage inside the tree healed, but if it killed some roots and branches in the platforms..."

Chime snorted in disagreement. "We would have noticed before now." He tended to give the younger male mentors a lot of attitude, and the others speculated that it might be pure jealousy of their powers. Moon was fairly certain it was pure jealousy of their powers.

Bone shook his head. He looked weary and worried, as if his age was wearing on him. "It's possible, but it might just be the rot from the blocked channels. The water's had to go somewhere, and it's been draining right through some of those platforms."

Jade said, "We can figure out how it happened later. What we need to do is decide how to repair the damaged branches and roots." Pearl had already left with most of her coterie, but Jade had been listening thoughtfully, chin propped on her hand, letting the others give voice to their fears and worries. Though Moon could tell she was

tired and ready to get away from them all for a while.

As the others all started to offer different ideas for the repair, Moon got up, threaded his way through them, and sat on his heels next to Jade. He leaned against her side, his groundling body against the warmth of her scales, and nuzzled her shoulder. Jade took his wrist and immediately pushed to her feet, tugging him along with her. Chime and Balm glanced up, both with inquiring looks. Moon shook his head slightly, telling them to stay behind. If Jade had wanted more company, she would have signaled for them to follow.

Once they had climbed up the inner well and were safely inside Jade's bower, she groaned, a comment on the whole long day. "We should have checked the platforms as soon as we got here. I should have thought of that."

"The tree looked solid," Moon pointed out. He shifted to his groundling form, going to the bowl hearth to put the kettle on the warming stones. "And it had been like this for turns with no problems." Which did lend weight to Merit's theory that the rot had been caused by the seed's removal.

"Yes, but..." Jade rubbed her forehead, then shook her spines out, as if shaking off pointless recriminations. She started to take off her jewelry, armbands, pectorals, and belt, dropping it into a glittering pile on the fur mat. "Pearl said the royal clutch saw Plum and the others fall. Were they upset?"

"Not really." Moon had taken a few moments during the afternoon to check on them. "I think they liked seeing me and the warriors catch them."

Jade snorted. "They would." The bathing pool was full and the warming stones in it had kept the water hot and steaming. She stepped in and sank down completely under the surface. Moon stripped off his shirt and pants and stepped in after her.

The water had been heating all day and would have been painfully hot for most soft-skinned groundlings, but Raksura loved heat, even in their most vulnerable form. Moon settled into it, leaning back against the smooth stone side of the basin, feeling the knots in his back relax.

Jade surfaced and shifted to her other form, the disturbance from the change making the water bubble up away from her. She leaned back, her frills floating around her.

Moon rested his head against the rim and breathed in the steam. "What did you and Pearl decide about letting the Arbora start

clutching again?"

"We were going to let them start after the first root harvest came in, the red tubers, and talk to them to make sure they all didn't clutch at once. But now, I don't know if we should go ahead with it." She added wearily, "But we still need warriors. I just hope they produce some this time."

"Maybe we'll have a clutch of warriors," Moon said, to see how she would respond.

"Maybe." She sounded matter-of-fact, which didn't exactly help. She pushed through the water, steam swirling around her, and leaned on the rim next to him. "Any luck with Bitter?"

Moon ran his fingers through her frills as they floated on the surface, and tried not to notice how quickly she had changed the subject. "Not yet."

"You should talk to Stone about it when he gets back."

Moon had been trying to avoid that, mostly because he wanted to solve this problem himself. And he was afraid Stone's methods might be more direct. "He'll want to throw Bitter off a branch and force him to fly."

Jade laughed. "No, he won't."

"If I wouldn't fly, he'd throw me off a branch."

"Yes, but that's you." Jade sunk down in the water, eyes closed, her nose just above the steaming surface.

Moon asked, "Do you want to sleep?"

She sat up with a splash, water streaming down her scales. "Not yet."

Moon smiled up at her, and suddenly found that all the worries were easy to put aside, at least for now. "What do you want to do?"

Jade took his wrist and pulled him up out of the water with her. "Guess."



When Moon woke the next morning in the hanging bed in Jade's bower, she was already awake, sitting up, and staring down at him.

He stretched, yawning. The air tasted of a fresh cool dawn, the sweet green scent of the tree, and Jade. Looking up at her, still bleary with sleep, he realized her expression was pensive and not a little worried. "What's wrong?"

She blinked, as if she had been so lost in thought she hadn't noticed he was awake. "Nothing." She leaned against the curving side of the bed, shaking her frills back. She was in Arbora form, softened by sleep, not wearing her jewelry and seeming vulnerable without that armor. "I couldn't sleep."

The bowers were quiet, except for the water trickling down from the channel above the pool. Before he could change his mind, he asked, "Do you still want a clutch?"

"Yes." The answer came with gratifying emphasis, though Jade still looked as if she was thinking of something else. Then she focused on him, her gaze suddenly sharp. "Why do you ask? Because we might have to put off letting the Arbora clutch again?"

"Right, that." Moon rolled over to her, wrapping an arm around her waist and hiding his face against the warm scales of her stomach. Jade hadn't changed her mind, so the problem was in him somewhere. He needed to talk to someone, find out what the chances were, if it might be something temporary. But whoever he spoke to might tell Jade, or worse, Pearl. "I thought you might want us to wait, too."

Her hand moved through his hair, then kneaded his shoulder, her claws grazing his skin possessively. "No. No, I don't want to wait."



The Arbora spent the next several days diverting the drainage channels from the more vulnerable outer platforms, and weaving more living branches into the root mats to support them. Moon stayed out with them, being a reassuring presence in case anyone fell, and occasionally helping with the work in the more difficult spots where wings and longer arms were needed. He took breaks only to visit the nurseries and to occasionally bring the royal clutch out to watch. Frost expressed disappointment that none of the Arbora fell, since she liked watching Moon fly so fast to catch them.

Plenty of the warriors helped with the task as well, and Jade and Pearl came out for the most difficult sections, but for some reason the Arbora still wanted Moon there. And they made their appreciation clear. The varieties of spiced roots he liked best appeared every night for the last meal. Rill made him a new sash, of a blue silky cloth brought from the old colony, worked over with vine patterns in black thread. Other gifts—flowers, polished stones, and braided leather and copper bead bracelets—showed up in his bower. Maybe consorts were considered lucky. Whatever the cause, after months of being alert for signs that the court's opinion was turning against him, it was a relief, at least for a while.

A few days into the work, Moon was hanging by his foot-claws from the supports of a platform, guiding the Arbora above to a dead branch woven through the living roots. It was partially rotted and might damage the platform's stability in the future, though it seemed sturdy enough now. The Arbora's footsteps crunched across the grass of the platform toward the broken spot Moon had marked, when River swooped up beside him.

River caught a root with one clawed hand, making the platform shiver. "What was that?" someone called from above, muffled by the layers of dirt and branches.

"Nothing," Moon assured them. It was more a comment on River's personality than his physical presence. "Absolutely nothing. Keep coming this way." Rustling and thumps sounded overhead as the Arbora resumed probing for the broken support.

River slung himself closer and folded his wings in. As a warrior his scales were blue with a green undersheen, and in his groundling form he was a dark-haired man with copper skin. He said, "You're letting them take advantage of you. Working you like a common warrior."

Moon had to laugh. "Thanks. You've always been so concerned on my behalf."

River flared his spines, contemptuous and amused. "You have no idea how other courts would look at this."

Moon was fairly certain he knew exactly how other courts would look at this, but he had no intention of stopping. Knowing River, he was probably repeating things that Pearl had said in private. Whether Pearl intended this or not was hard to tell; River only appointed himself to speak for Pearl when Pearl was nowhere around. "If you don't want other courts to know, then don't tell them."

"You think no one will talk about this on the next trading visit?" River's amusement was turning into real irritation. "The courts in the Reaches have to see us as something besides struggling refugees coming back to our old mountain-tree to die off in peace. It's bad enough that they know we have a feral consort with no bloodline; when you act like one you're shaming all of us, making us look weak."

The biting suspicion that River might be right made Moon snap, "If the gardens keep collapsing, nobody's going to care what kind of consort you've been stuck with." Above them, on top of the platform, the Arbora were digging down through the loam, getting closer, and he didn't want them to hear this.

“Exactly.” River bared his teeth in real frustration. “If the queens could convince another court to give us a consort, don’t you think they would?”

A crunch overhead told Moon that the Arbora had broken through the crust above the supports. Bramble’s voice said, “Oh, it’s River. That’s why there’s an argument.”

Spice’s voice seconded her. “Well, he couldn’t be here to help!”

River hissed at them and dropped from the branch, snapped his wings out, and angled to catch the updraft.

Moon stayed where he was, flexing his claws into the wood, while Bramble and Spice and the others dug and chatted and sawed at the rotted support. He didn’t think the Arbora were taking advantage of him, not intentionally. But it had been turns since they had had a real first consort, since Pearl’s consort Rain had died. After that there had just been a few young consorts sent away to queens in other courts, and Stone. Maybe they hadn’t thought about Indigo Cloud’s place with the other courts. Most of them had only seen foreign queens and warriors when they came to visit, and that had been rare for Indigo Cloud even before the court moved here.

It doesn’t matter, he reminded himself, if the Arbora or the warriors or even Jade led him astray, let him get away with more than he should. No one was going to ask for or accept excuses for his behavior. You’re on your own, as usual.



Later that day, a storm came up, the high wind and heavy rain making only indoor work possible. Jade was busy with Balm somewhere in the colony, so Moon ended up sleeping with Chime in his bower.

Queens and consorts usually had warrior lovers, and no one seemed to mind that Moon slept with Chime occasionally. Which was good, because Chime had really wanted to.

Stubbornly, Chime had never moved out of the teachers’ level up to the warriors’, though he did have a bower with a balcony looking out into the lower central well below the greeting hall. Moon hated storms but the tree’s heavy trunk made the thunder a distant grumble, and the air from the balcony held the fresh scent of rain that had drifted in through the knothole. Chime’s bower-bed was warm and comfortable, but Moon couldn’t relax into sleep.

He finally said, “I need to ask you something.”

“Um.” Still half-asleep, Chime nuzzled his shoulder. Chime

claimed to have gotten used to every aspect of being an Aeriati rather than an Arbora, except for the need for more rest. Once he was asleep he was hard to wake.

“Can consorts and male Arbora turn their fertility off like queens and female Arbora?” Moon was hoping the reason Jade hadn’t clutched yet was something that he needed to do, or needed to stop doing. One of those things that everyone assumed he knew all about that he had no idea existed.

In the past months, Moon had found out everything he could about clutches, and why stillbirths seemed so common. The mentors said that the babies in a clutch might be conceived at different times, so that when the first was ready for birth, some of the others might not be as developed. It also didn’t help that queens developed in the womb faster than consorts, and consorts faster than warriors. This wasn’t as big a factor for the Arbora clutches, because Arbora and warrior babies developed at about the same rate. Moon thought he had asked about everything he needed to know, but it hadn’t occurred to him that the conception process might entail more than the obvious.

Chime pushed up on one elbow and stared blearily at him. “No. Why would we need to suppress our fertility—I mean, why would they? They don’t need to. It’s the females who decide when to clutch.” He shook his head, baffled. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Moon let his breath out in disappointment. There went that, unless it was a secret consort thing that not even a former mentor would know about, which he doubted. That left the other, far more disturbing possibility: that Moon wasn’t as fertile as a consort was supposed to be.

Chime settled back down, grumbling, “You do ask the oddest questions.”



A few days went past, mostly uneventful. There were no more platform collapses, and no serious sickness and only a few hunting injuries. The work on the gardens was going so well, the hunters decided to go ahead with the plan to take the warrior fledglings and the younger Arbora on a teaching hunt. Moon took advantage of the opportunity to ask to bring Frost, Thorn, and Bitter along, too.

There was a Raksuran prejudice that queens and consorts didn’t hunt; they were taught to, but only later, when they were past fledglinghood. But Moon would have died as a boy if his foster mother hadn’t taught him to hunt when he was barely able to leap from

branch to branch. He thought he would have trouble convincing Pearl that the royal fledglings needed to learn along with the others, but she gave in with only minor grumbling.

That actually made Moon more worried than anything else. The concession had been granted with suspicious ease, almost as if Pearl felt sorry for him for some reason. He made the mistake of mentioning it to Chime, who said, “You really are crazy, aren’t you?”

“No.” Moon hissed in annoyance. “It’s just strange. I know she’s humoring me, but why would she bother?”

Chime sighed. “She probably thinks she owes you a favor after you saved Plum and have been helping so much with the work on the gardens.”

Moon grudgingly admitted that might be it.

Despite Moon’s suspicions, it was a very good day. Moon didn’t let Frost and Thorn try to take any game, but had them watch the others and then get their claws dirty helping the Arbora bleed and gut the carcasses of their prey. Bitter didn’t make any attempt to fly, but he did obviously enjoy the outing. He was carted around by Moon, Balm, Chime, and the female warrior Floret, as well as Bone and some other Arbora hunters, mostly Bramble and Salt. He helped with the gutting and got as covered with mud, loam, and blood as Frost and Thorn.

After they returned to the tree, Moon took the royal clutch down to the nurseries for baths and sleep. On his way back, he passed one of the small workrooms and saw two Arbora sitting on the floor, bent over a glittering pile on a stone slab, deep in a discussion about whether to use amethysts or polished onyx. It was Merry and Gold, the two best artisans in the court. Curious, Moon stepped into the room to look at what they were making.

It was a fingerwidth-wide band, in pieces now so it was hard to tell if it was meant for a bracelet, necklace, or ankle or arm band. It was figured with the coiled shapes of Aeriats, all with wings half-spread and outstretched arms, intended to hold polished stones that hadn’t been set into place yet. Moon was startled again by how intricate the Arbora’s creations were, how much hard work they were willing to do just for the sake of art. “That’s beautiful.”

Merry and Gold both flinched, staring up at him. “Moon!” Gold, an older female with masses of curly auburn hair, managed to say, “Uh, we didn’t hear you come in.”

“Sorry.” Moon sat on his heels for a closer look at the piece. “Is it

for Jade or Pearl?” Now that they were getting visits from other courts, the Arbora might be feeling a need to make sure their queens had more impressive finery.

Moon looked up in time to catch a fleeting expression of relief on Gold’s face, but it was gone too fast to be sure he hadn’t imagined it. “It’s for Pearl,” Merry said. Lifting his brows, he added, “You think she’ll like it?”

Gold nudged Merry’s shoulder, giving him a quick glare, as if she hadn’t liked the question. That Moon definitely hadn’t imagined. “Of course she will,” he said, and stood, leaving before it got more awkward. They must have thought he would be annoyed that it was meant for Pearl and not Jade.

It was two days later when Moon figured out who the piece was actually for.



It had rained all night and much of the morning, very bad conditions for work on the outer platforms, so most of the court was staying inside today. Moon sat with the others in the teachers’ hall, which had become a common gathering place for Arbora and Aeriat alike.

It was a large central chamber below the greeting hall, its walls and domed ceiling covered with a detailed carving of a forest, with plume trees, spirals, fern trees, and many others, their branches reaching up to entwine overhead, their roots framing the round doorways that led off to different passages. With the shells set into the walls glowing with soft white light and the hearth basins filled with warming stones, it was a comfortable welcoming space. There was always someone there, and it was a good place to go if you wanted to talk, or just listen to others talk. Someone was always making tea, baked spiced roots, or flatbread, and the older Arbora gathered there to tell stories, or read aloud from one of the books in the mentors’ library.

Moon liked the readings best, since that was his only chance to hear what was in the books. He had taught himself to read the other languages he could speak, but Altanic and Kedaic had much simpler writing systems. The written Raksuran language was proving just as twisty and complicated as the Raksura themselves.

He had been trying to remedy this, timing many of his visits to the nurseries to coincide with reading lessons. He sat with Frost, Bitter, and Thorn while Rill or Bark or one of the other teachers drew the letters and words on clay tablets and the fledglings copied her.

When they read from the simpler books, Moon looked over their shoulders. It wasn't a particularly effective way to learn, since he couldn't be there for every lesson and he couldn't ask questions without giving himself away. But he had made some progress, memorizing all the characters for the various sounds, and he was starting to recognize a number of words. He didn't think anyone had caught on, except, oddly enough, for Thorn.

At the third lesson Moon had attended, Thorn had eyed Moon thoughtfully, and moved his tablet so Moon had a better view of it. Moon had eyed him back, but they had never spoken of it, and Moon was fairly sure Thorn hadn't shared his suspicion with anyone else, even Frost or Bitter. He thought Thorn might like having a secret to share with Moon, something that was his alone. That suited Moon.

But that rainy afternoon in the teachers' hall, no one brought out a book. Instead, Rill said, "Moon, tell us a story about groundlings."

The Arbora and older warriors settled in to listen, and even the young warriors lounging on the fringes of the group were hard put to conceal their interest. The entire court knew Moon's life had been substantially different from theirs, but most of them had little idea of what that really meant. They knew he had traveled widely and seen strange places, but so had Stone. Moon had never seen much point in trying to convey what it had really been like, so he avoided stories like the time he had had to flee a Morain cliff-town in the middle of the night, got trapped in a tunnel and had to hide in a crack in the rock barely wider than his body while his former comrades hunted him.

So he told them about the Deshar in the hanging city of Zenna, and their elaborate social customs that made passing through the place so difficult for visitors. Predictably, everyone wanted to hear more about the Deshar's attitudes about sex, which were as baffling to the other Raksura as they had been to Moon at the time.

"So if they have sex without this ceremony first, they can't have it again?" Bone said, scratching the scar around his neck thoughtfully. He was clearly having trouble following this strange brand of logic.

Moon tried to explain. "Sort of. You can only have sex with your permanent mate, and you can't have a permanent mate without the ceremony, and if you have sex before the ceremony, nobody wants to be your permanent mate."

Bark frowned. "But do they have to have a permanent mate?" Except for queens and consorts, Raksura usually didn't.

"If they want babies. If you have a baby with anybody but a

permanent mate, it's bad. For you and the baby." The idea that offspring might be unwanted was hard for Raksura to understand as well. Queens and Arbora only clutched when they wanted to, and there were always teachers to take care of the babies or fledglings.

"But how do the others know if someone's had sex?" Chime protested. "How can they tell? If they have sex without the ceremony, shouldn't they just keep quiet about it?"

"Do they change color when they have sex?" Balm asked thoughtfully.

"No. They just seemed to know." Moon admitted, "I never figured that part out."

Bone snorted, stretching to pick up the kettle. "Strange creatures. Though I'm sure they'd say the same of us."

If confronted by a Raksura, the Deshar would probably have been too busy having hysterics to say anything. In the east where Raksuran courts were rare, groundlings confused them with Fell. Before Moon could point this out, one of the soldiers, Grain, dropped down the stairwell from the greeting hall, calling out, "Where's— Moon, visitors just arrived from another court! Two queens, and some warriors, and they've got a consort with them!"

Everyone gasped and exclaimed. Moon exchanged an alarmed look with Chime and Balm. That meant this was the most formal form of visit. It would have to be today, Moon thought. Everyone would have been tracking mud and water through the greeting hall all morning. Knowing Raksura, the visitors had probably planned it this way to put them at a disadvantage. He said, "Is someone telling the queens?"

"Yes, Sage went up there," Grain told him, bouncing up and down with excitement.

Rill stood hastily, shaking crumbs out of her skirt. To Balm, she said, "We should give them tea in the greeting hall first, give them a chance to dry off before we send them up to the queens' hall."

Balm got to her feet, looking down at herself helplessly. "I have to get up there." The senior female warriors were the ones who were supposed to initially greet visitors, and as Jade's clutchmate, Balm was the most senior one available. She was wearing an old pair of brown pants and a shirt stained with the juice from the berries they had all been eating, and her only jewelry was a copper armband. She was still beautiful, but it was definitely not the way to be dressed while formally greeting two foreign queens and a consort. Moon looked

worse, but he wouldn't have to appear until the first round of formal greetings were done, and that might take quite a while, depending on how difficult the queens all decided to be.

"Wait, wait," Rill said, and whipped off her dress, holding it out toward Balm. "Put this on!"

"Oh, good idea." Balm took her shirt off and pulled on the sleeveless dress. She was much taller than Rill, so on her it was more of a tunic, but the dye on the soft fabric was a blue that faded to violet toward the hem, and it looked good against Balm's dark groundling skin. Someone else contributed a necklace of flat polished amethyst and everyone judged Balm ready to go.

Balm took a deep breath and started up the stairs with Grain, as everyone else scattered to get cushions and one of the better tea sets. Moon headed off to take the back passages up to the consorts' level.

As Moon traveled upward through the colony, he warned everyone he met about the visitors. When he reached the Aeriats levels, he skipped the queens' level and went right to the consorts', tracing a path through the maze of empty rooms and antechambers and bathing rooms to his bower, just above Jade's.

He hadn't spent a lot of time here. During the evenings, he was either down in Jade's bower, or Chime's, or sitting with the others in the teachers' hall. But this was the first time he had had a room in a permanent structure that was just for him.

The curving ceiling was carved with Aeriats in flight, on a background of waves that Chime had said symbolized the west wind. The half-shell of the bed hung near the far wall, lined with comfortable blankets and cushions. The hearth basin was in the center, and filled with fresh warming stones. There were a couple of furs and some cushions to sit on, and a woven-reed basket stood against the opposite wall, holding a few extra blankets and his clothes. A normal consort Moon's age would have far more possessions than this, baskets stuffed with belongings and gifts. What Moon had was a narrow shelf in the wall, holding the things that the fledglings and the Arbora children had given him on his visits to the nurseries. These were usually shiny rocks or pieces of wood, or intricate little sculptures made out of twigs or twisted scraps of cloth.

He opened the top basket, and pulled out his best set of clothes. The shirt and pants were made of the same silky fabric, the color a blue so dark it was almost black. He also had a belt-sash woven through with gold threads. That, with his consort's gift, a heavy red-gold bracelet with the serpentine shapes of two entwined Raksura

etched into the band, should be enough to make him look respectable. And respectable was about as good as it was going to get.

Chime ducked in through the doorway, having hastily changed clothes as well. "Is that what you're wearing?" he said, as Moon was pulling the shirt over his head. He caught Moon's narrow-eyed look and waved his hands. "Sorry, I'll be quiet!"

Moon had arrived at Indigo Cloud with nothing except the clothes on his back, which by that point had been about to fall off. He now had clothes for both everyday use and to save for special occasions, which was more than he had ever owned in his entire life. "Did you hear where they were from?"

"Yes, and it's a little odd." Chime paced anxiously, tightening the sash around his waist. "One of the queens is Tempest, from Emerald Twilight."

"Again?" That was odd. Unless this visit was meant as amends for the last abbreviated one. Or revenge for the last abbreviated one. But they brought a consort.

"I know, it doesn't make sense." Chime waved his hands, baffled. "The other queen is Zephyr, a sister queen from Sunset Water. They're related somehow. I think she's the daughter of an Emerald Twilight consort, maybe Shadow's clutchmate, who was given to the reigning Sunset Water queen."

Moon committed that to memory, in case it came up in later conversations. One of the benefits to being a consort was that he wasn't expected to talk much during these visits. He would presumably have to speak to the other consort at some point, though. Just don't get in a fight, he reminded himself.

Chime continued, "But I can't think why Tempest is here with her. It's not like a Sunset Water queen would need an introduction. They must have known we'd be happy to make an alliance with them."

"We'll find out," Moon said. He folded his arms, resisting the urge to pace with Chime. It would be a while before he needed to appear. The warriors would be made comfortable down in the greeting hall, and the queens would be taken up to the queens' hall to make pointed conversation with Jade, then Pearl would appear, then finally they would send for Moon. It might be different, considering the extra queen and the consort, but...

"Moon?" Floret stepped into the doorway. Her face was anxious, her copper skin flushed. "They want you in the queens' hall now."

“Already?” Chime stared. “Are you sure?”

Floret spared him an annoyed glance. “Very sure.” She told Moon, “Jade is...tense.”

“Right.” Moon bit his lip. Obviously the situation with Tempest was about to come to a head. It can’t be that bad. They wouldn’t bring a consort with them to declare war on us. I think. “I’ll go down.”

Chime said, worriedly, “Good luck.”

Moon took the winding stair down to the consorts’ passage, pausing for a quick look into the queens’ hall.

Everyone was sitting near the hearth basin, which had been filled with fresh warming stones, steaming faintly in the damp air. Cushions had been scattered around for seating, with the visiting queens and the consort facing Jade and Pearl, with Bone, Heart, Bell, and Knell, representing the four castes of the Arbora, arrayed in a half circle behind them. The four Arbora must have been hastily summoned; they were wearing silk robes, embroidered or with water-faded patterns. This was something of a shock, since Moon had seldom seen Bone and Knell wear anything but battered leathers and work clothes. The best kettle was on the heating stones in the hearth, with a set of blue-glazed cups waiting nearby.

Everyone was in groundling form, except the four queens, who were still winged. Jade and Pearl wore their best jewelry, armbands, heavy necklaces, rings, belts of silver wire and flat polished stones.

Facing them were the two foreign queens. Tempest was about Jade’s age, with light blue scales webbed with gold. Zephyr of Sunset Water, seated beside her, was older, with a heavier build, and had dark amber scales with a green web. The smaller figure of the consort was seated behind them, wearing a dark robe with the hood pulled up. From this angle all Moon could see were his hands, folded tightly in his lap.

Moon took a deep breath, and stepped out into the hall.

All eyes immediately went to him for one nerve-racking moment, then away. About halfway across the hall it occurred to him that no one was speaking, not even the pointed bordering-on-insult conversation of two courts testing one another. The Arbora radiated tension, all except Bone, who was as still as a rock.

Moon took a seat behind Jade, trying not to look awkward as he settled on the cushion. Pearl flicked her spines in acknowledgement, then started the introductions, naming Jade, Moon, and the four Arbora for the two foreign queens.

Fortunately, Moon wasn't required to respond or acknowledge anyone during this part. He used the moment to try a casual glance over at the other consort, but the man was looking down, the hood obscuring his expression. All Moon could see was that he was fairly young, with light bronze skin.

Moon leaned down, tilting his head, trying for an angle that would give him a better look under the hood. Jade reached over and pinched his leg, and he sat up straight. It wasn't Tempest's consort, or at least not her main consort; Moon had met him briefly at Emerald Twilight, and he had been about Moon's size. This consort must belong to Zephyr, which had to be a good sign.

Pearl finished her introductions, and Tempest said, with a trace of impatience, "Tempest, sister queen of Emerald Twilight, and Zephyr, sister queen of Sunset Water."

Zephyr rippled her spines in acknowledgement, though she looked distinctly uncomfortable. Moon expected her to introduce the consort, but she didn't.

Silence fell for a moment. Then Pearl said, "I think we all know what this is about."

No one responded. As stiff as if even being here in the same room with them was an insult, Tempest said, "As I said last time, I've brought Zephyr, to prove that this is not some trick." Her gaze on Jade, she said, "Did you tell him?"

Moon stared, a jolt of apprehension shooting through his body, as if he had heard the first reverberating grumble of a thunderstorm. This wouldn't be about one of the Arbora, and there was only one other "him" here. He looked at Jade.

Jade showed Tempest the tips of her fangs. "No. I told you I wouldn't."

It was Bone who said, with quiet force, "The Arbora haven't been told, so perhaps someone could explain."

Her voice stiff with embarrassment, Heart said, "I was asked by both our queens not to speak of it."

Bone reached over and patted her knee, showing that he didn't blame her. "Well, apparently we're speaking of it now."

Pearl waved a lazy claw toward their visitors. "It's their doing. Let them explain."

Zephyr turned to Tempest, who was still locked in a staring contest with Jade. Resigned, Zephyr inclined her head to Bone, and

said, “Your consort was from a court to the east, near the Gulf of Abascene, that was destroyed.”

“Yes.” Bone’s frown deepened. He glanced at Moon, whose heart had started to pound. “He was too young to remember anything of it.”

Zephyr conceded that with a nod. “When he was brought to Emerald Twilight a season ago, the reigning queen Ice believed that she might have recognized his bloodline.”

Moon made himself take a breath, careful not to let it out as a hiss. Bone, Knell, and Bell looked at him in growing consternation, but Heart had her eyes fixed on the floor.

Zephyr continued, “Ice said nothing of this at the time, because she wasn’t certain. It had been many, many turns since she visited the court in question. So she sent warriors to them with a message, asking if they had had a branch of their court go east during the turns of the Great Leaving, and if they had heard news from that branch in the past forty or so turns. They replied that they had, and that the portion of the court that had split off and gone to the east had been attacked and partially destroyed, and the survivors had returned to the home colony. They asked the reason for her curiosity.”

Tempest, as if unable to hold her peace a moment longer, snapped, “She was trying to do you a favor.”

Jade’s expression was stony. “And it’s turned out so well.”

Zephyr cleared her throat. “Ice sent another message, asking if among the lost there had been a consort fledgling called Moon. The message they sent in return—”

Jade’s voice was as tight as wire. “What do they want?”

Zephyr took a sharp breath. Still speaking to Bone, she said, “As Tempest told your queens on her last visit, Ice thought they would offer your court an alliance. At worst, she thought they would ignore the connection. Their response was...unexpected. Ice has been attempting to negotiate with them, to explain that the consort has been taken and there is no need to—”

Tempest said, flatly, “They want him back.”

Silence settled over the room, as if everyone had stopped breathing. Bone shook his head in grim disbelief. Bell looked as though he didn’t understand and didn’t want to, Knell’s face gave away nothing. Heart just looked miserable. Moon said, “Tell them to piss off.”

Everyone turned to stare at him in blank shock, as if the kettle

had spoken. As if they just expected him to sit here silently and take this. He said, more pointedly, “Tell them to piss off.”

Pearl settled her spines. Jade reached for Moon’s wrist and he jerked his arm away in reflex. He was burning with fury. They—Jade—had lied to him, kept this from him.

Tempest asked Jade, “Have you clutched yet?”

Jade’s claws flexed, but she said, evenly enough, “No.”

Tempest sat back, hissing in a mix of regret and irritation.

“What?” Moon demanded. “Why does it matter if we’ve clutched or not?”

Her voice dry, Pearl said, “If you’d clutched, we could tell them to piss off.”

Zephyr stirred uneasily. Glancing from Jade to Pearl, she said, “I know what it looks like. But you’ve seen that Emerald Twilight has more consorts than they know what to do with. The idea never occurred to Ice or anyone else that a court would want one back, once he was claimed by a queen and comfortably settled.”

Moon said, “What do they want? In exchange for me.” He had a moment to realize that his voice sounded oddly normal, considering the turmoil going on in the rest of him.

Nobody answered. Pearl said, “It doesn’t work that way.” The trace of sympathy in her voice was almost the worst blow of the day. “We have no right to have you here.”

Her voice low and tight with tension, Jade told him, “We have to go there. I’ll have to formally ask them for you. Everything will be all right. They have an advantage over us, and they want to press it, that’s all. Don’t worry.”

That’s all. Don’t worry. It was nothing; that was why she and Pearl and Heart had been lying to him about it since Tempest’s last visit. Moon looked at the other consort, huddled silently behind the queens. If he belonged to Zephyr...They should have introduced him. They should have done that before now. He said to Zephyr, “Who is he? Does he belong to you?”

Startled, Zephyr twitched her tail, but didn’t answer. She threw a pointed look at Tempest.

Moon rounded on Jade. “Why is he here?”

Her claws flexed again, and she said, “It’s not what you think.”

Moon snarled and shifted, took one bound to the edge of the well

and flung himself off. He dropped all the way down to the greeting hall, snapping his wings out at the last moment to break his fall. He landed on the floor in a crouch, scattered startled warriors and Arbora, and shot through the narrow passage out through the knothole, so fast he scraped his scales on the turns.

Chapter Four

Moon ended up in the mountain-tree's canopy, higher up than anyone usually ventured, hanging upside down by his tail. The branches were narrower here, barely a few paces across, reaching up to tangle and weave themselves into a nearly impenetrable barrier. Nearly impenetrable. Earlier when the rain had stopped and the clouds opened up, Moon had climbed up through the entwined branches to fly above the forest.

He flew up past the clouds, into the bright sunlight, feeling the heat of it on his scales. He circled for a long time, listening to the distant high-pitched cries of the skylings that inhabited the upper air.

When the sun had moved toward evening, the clouds closed in again, and he dropped back to the tree canopy. He passed down through the branches into deep gloom, where drifts of mist formed, obscuring the lower platforms. He hung from a branch, listening to the birds and the treelings trill and chatter around him.

By nightfall it had started to rain heavily again, and Moon reluctantly decided he would have to go inside. The water drumming on the leaves and wood was not only uncomfortable, it would conceal any sound or scent of approaching predators. While being eaten would end all his problems, he wasn't quite ready for so final a solution.

He started down, jumping from branch to branch. Closer to the trunk, he saw a circle of light, and realized it was the outside door in the consort's level. It was never left open.

This gesture, for some reason, just ruined what little sense of calm and balance he had managed to attain. Hissing with irritation, he dropped down to the opening and landed on the little ledge below the door.

He took a cautious glance inside. The soft glow of the shells reflected warm red glints off the walls, and the room was empty. Moon climbed in and struggled to pull the heavy wooden door plug shut, then shot the bolts that held it in place. It was an awkward job to manage alone, and standing there, breathing hard from the effort, he felt exhaustion settle over him like a blanket. He had flown much further than he had today, on less food, but the intense emotion was draining. He shifted to groundling, forgetting that his scales were still

wet. The water shifted with him, soaking his clothes and making them stick damply to his skin. That was about all he needed. He swore wearily and sneezed.

“Moon?” The tentative voice belonged to Rill. She stood in the doorway that led into the consorts’ bowers, watching him worriedly. “Why don’t you come in here? We’ve just made some tea.”

The last thing Moon wanted to do was talk, and it must have shown in his expression; Rill hastily withdrew.

Moon leaned on the wall and massaged the growing ache in his temple. He wanted to go to his own bower and sleep, but from the sound of movement and faint voices, he could tell they were between him and it.

Resigned, he traced his way through the maze of the empty consorts’ quarters, his feet leaving wet prints on the smooth wood. The breeze from the open doorway had found its way through here, and the air was almost as damp as it was outside.

He found them in a little sitting area that connected four of the larger bowers, one of them his. He stopped warily in the doorway, but the room held only Chime, Song, Root, Floret, and Vine, seated around the bowl of warming stones. Everyone was in groundling form, and everyone was staring at him, and it was hard to imagine a more uncomfortable moment. He saw Rill slip out through the opposite passage, probably going to tell Jade that he was back.

Moon was about to walk past them to his bower, when Chime smiled tentatively. “The foreign queens are still here, but they’re down in the guest quarters. So, you don’t have to see them.”

Moon didn’t have anything to say to that statement, which was bordering on the nonsensical. As if avoiding the queens would help. Song, braver than the others, patted the cushion next to her and said, “Moon, sit with us.”

That seemed to break the spell of awkward silence for the others. Chime moved the kettle back to the fire, and added, “Yes, come and sit. It must have been cold out there, when the rain started again.”

Vine put in, “They say the first rainy season is coming on now.”

Floret took that up hurriedly. “Not big storms though. Just a lot of rain like this, usually in the evening.”

It was suddenly tempting, and Moon felt his resolve weaken. After silently raging half the day, it would be something of a relief to sit here and listen to them talk about the weather and pretend nothing had happened.

He moved forward and took a seat on a woven grass mat, his clothes squelching unpleasantly. Chime hurriedly poured a cup of tea and set it in front of him.

As Moon picked it up, Chime cleared his throat. "We wanted to ask you to talk to the new consort."

Moon stared at him, too incredulous to react. Chime, his eyes on the dregs in the bottom of the teapot, didn't notice. He continued, "He begged Tempest not to leave him here. We heard him."

Song rolled her shoulders uncomfortably. "Think about what it's like to be packed off to a court where no one wants you."

Moon pressed a hand to his temple, fighting the urge to laugh.

"He doesn't have to think about it," Root said suddenly, with a pointed glance around at the others. "Nobody wanted Moon here, remember?"

There was a moment of appalled silence. Then Floret hissed and aimed a slap at Root's head. He rolled out of reach, bounced up to stand in the safety of the passage door, and hissed at them all. "You know it's true!"

Root had been one of those who hadn't wanted Moon here, though he had changed his mind at some point. His insistence on saying exactly what he thought, without restraint, had always been annoying. But for once Moon was glad to have someone acknowledging the obvious.

Exasperated, Floret started to stand, asking Root, "What's wrong with you?"

Moon said, "Leave him alone."

His voice came out in a hard rasp. Everyone went still for a moment, then Floret sank back onto the mat. Root ducked down the passage and made his escape.

The silence stretched, until Chime continued, stubbornly, "Someone has to talk to the new consort."

"You talk to him." Moon drained his cup and set it aside. At least he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

Chime looked up at last, his brow furrowed. "I can't, I shouldn't. I'm your friend."

Moon pushed to his feet. "You're going to need a new friend," he said, and walked past them, through the passage and the door of his bower.

Once inside he stopped. He hadn't spent much time in this room, and now he never would. He went to the basket and pulled out the old clothes that Petal had found for him back on his first day in the court, a dark-colored shirt of fine soft material and pants of tougher fabric. They had been mended and stained a little, and he wore them for exploring trips and hunting. Everything he owned was a gift predicated on him being the consort of Indigo Cloud, but a gift from poor dead Petal he was still willing to accept.

He changed into them, and was draping his wet clothes over the chest when Chime walked in.

"Why are you so angry?" Chime demanded. "Did you even see him, he's practically a fledgling. He's probably not even fertile yet—"

Moon rounded on him and Chime fell back a step, startled into silence. Gritting his teeth to keep from shifting and biting Chime's head off, Moon said, "That's Jade's problem. I'll be gone tomorrow and I don't give a piss what you all do with him."

Chime just looked bewildered. "Gone tomorrow? What?"

"Tomorrow, the next day, whenever." Moon couldn't believe that Tempest would spend one more moment at Indigo Cloud than she absolutely had to, or that Jade and Pearl would let her.

Chime's jaw dropped and his expression turned appalled. "You can't leave, not over this! That's crazy. Moon, it's not worth it." He waved a hand in exasperation. "You just don't understand; it doesn't mean what you think it does. Just because Jade takes another consort doesn't mean she doesn't want you—"

"Stop it," Moon snapped. It was impossible that Chime didn't know. But Chime was still staring at him, confused, hurt. "I'm not leaving. They're taking me to another court. It's a trade, Chime, me for a new consort."

"What?" Chime's expression now clearly said that he thought Moon was out of his mind. "No, you must have misunderstood."

Hearing it put like that made Moon realize just how badly he wanted it to be a misunderstanding. Watching his face, Chime's eyes widened. "But—"

"Moon." It was Jade, standing in the doorway.

Moon stepped away from Chime, looking toward the basin hearth. He had been expecting Jade to appear, but he had no idea what she was going to say to him, or what he wanted to say to her.

Jade said, "Moon, come with me."

His throat went dry, then he told himself not to be stupid. They couldn't be leaving now; it was dark, raining. "Where?"

Irritation colored her voice. "To my bower, where do you think?"

Anger boiled, mostly at himself for that moment of fear. As if he had never been a helpless fledgling fighting for his life on a stormy night; this was nothing. He said, "Why? Do you want to make sure I don't run away?"

Jade's spines flared as she stepped forward. "Then we'll talk here. Chime, get out."

Chime hesitated, but then he fled, slipping out the door.

She came further into the bower and stopped a few paces away. She folded her arms, but her tail was twitching, betraying nerves. "They didn't know. I told Heart and the others not to speak of it yet. They thought you were angry because I accepted a new consort from Tempest."

"You didn't think they'd notice when I left?" Moon didn't think it would make a difference whether the court knew or not. If the leaders of the Arbora castes weren't going to make any objection, then it didn't matter what the warriors thought. Not that he had many friends among the warriors.

The nervous flicking of Jade's tail turned into an outright lash. "Moon, this is nothing. I'll appease Opal Night by formally asking for you, and we'll come home. I promise you—"

Opal Night, Moon thought. If he had been hoping for a long-buried start of recognition, it didn't come. The name meant nothing. "If it's that simple, why did Tempest bring you a consort to replace me?"

"He's not a replacement!" The words came out as a snarl, and Jade took a deep breath before she continued, "He's an apology from Emerald Twilight. What happened with Halcyon was embarrassment enough, but when their attempt to make up for it turns into this—"

"You knew they were bringing him. When Tempest came here before, that's what she told you. You knew..." Moon let the words trail off. The wristband. The one he had caught Gold and Merry making. Gold's embarrassment and Merry's sly question. It was a gift for him, the new consort. It was another twist in his heart.

Jade turned away and paced a few steps toward the hearth. That told Moon everything he needed to know. Her voice low, Jade said, "She came to warn us. I didn't want to tell you. I wanted to...wait."

He didn't ask for what. Of course she wanted to wait to tell him. Better to keep him quiet and obedient and in her bed until the new consort arrived. It wasn't unprecedented. Every bleak day he had been kicked out of a groundling camp or town was parading through Moon's memory, every time his willingness to fit in had been taken advantage of, every small betrayal, every time someone had said, You're a good worker, but...

Jade's spines shivered. "Zephyr said Opal Night is a powerful court, the largest in the far west Reaches. She and Tempest haven't been there. Emerald Twilight hasn't had trade with them for turns, and Ice sent her messages to them through other courts." Impatient at his silence, she said, "You aren't the least bit curious to know your family?"

That was the wrong tack to take. You're my family, he wanted to say. But it didn't feel true anymore. "No."

She watched him, her frown deepening. "Why not?"

Moon closed his eyes, forcing the anger down enough to give her a real answer. He had been better off thinking they were all dead, that he was the last remnant of a destroyed court. Now he knew the bitter truth. "Sorrow was carrying four baby Arbora and a fledgling. How far from her colony do you think she got?"

Jade didn't answer. He opened his eyes, in time to see the flicker of doubt in her expression. She admitted, "Not far."

"They could have searched. They could have found us. That's what she was waiting for. She waited turns for them to find us."

"Maybe they thought there were no survivors. Maybe they gave up."

"You and Pearl didn't give up." When the Fell had taken the old Indigo Cloud colony, trapping most of the court, Jade and Pearl had been determined to free them or die with them.

"Pearl and I didn't have a mother court to run back to." Jade hissed out a breath and looked away. "You won't know their reason unless you ask them."

"You want me to go." It was as close as he could come to speaking the thought at the center of the biggest knot of pain in his chest. Jade had said she still wanted a clutch and he believed her. If they had had one by now, they wouldn't be in this situation. She had to realize the problem was with him, that he could contribute nothing to Indigo Cloud's future. Turning him out of the court or even out of her bed might have seemed too harsh, especially after the way he had

helped them find the stolen seed, and the promises she had made him. But this was a way to be rid of him with a clear conscience.

It would almost be easier if she admitted it. Almost.

But Jade, as if annoyed at his obtuseness, said, "Of course not. Queens don't give up consorts."

"Cloud's queen gave him up. That's why you're all here."

"You know only one story from our history and that's the second time you've thrown it in my face." Anger hardening her voice again, she said, "I told you, I'll follow you there, and make them give you back. I won't leave there without you."

"Follow me?"

Jade's jaw set. "Tempest refuses to let me travel with her. She thinks it would only antagonize Opal Night further. But I'll only be a day behind you."

He wanted to believe that, so bad it made his bones ache. But he couldn't; the faith just wasn't there. "You've been lying to me about this for days. Why should I believe you now?"

In the next heartbeat Jade had crossed the space between them and grabbed his shoulders. Her claws pricked his skin through the silky material of his shirt and her face was a tight combination of hurt and fury. "You want me to hurt you so you can hate me? Would that make this easier?"

Moon didn't flinch. "Nothing could make this easier."

It was only the heartfelt truth, and Jade's expression turned stricken. She released him and moved away, staring down at the floor as if it had the answers. After a long moment, she said, quietly, "I promise you, you will be back here as First Consort before the month changes."

Even as she said it, the overwhelming sense that it wouldn't happen overcame him. She might believe she was telling the truth, but he knew it wouldn't come to pass. He said, "When does Tempest mean to leave?"

Jade's spines flattened. She looked up, brows lowered. "Tomorrow morning, if the rain's stopped."

"I'll be there," Moon said, and walked past her and out of the room.

He slept in Stone's empty bower that night. The blankets in the bed still retained a wisp of Stone's scent, and it made Moon remember

that first trip across the mountains and the plains to the old Indigo Cloud colony, when anything had seemed possible.



When Moon woke, he thought at first it was an ordinary day. While the garden platforms were drying out, he and Jade had had a tentative plan to go flying through the suspended forest with Chime, Balm, and some of the other warriors, if the rain held off. Rain, he thought, and remembered.

He lay still, listening, filtering out the faint sounds of movement and voices from elsewhere in the tree, the falling water from the nearest fountains. He couldn't hear drops drumming on the trunk or branches. If it was raining, it was too light to be heard. Which meant they would be leaving today.

Good, he told himself, knowing from experience that dragging out his departure would just make it that much worse.

But there were things he had to do first. He dragged himself out of Stone's bed and dropped to the floor, his head aching and his muscles tense and sore. He felt as tired as if he hadn't slept at all. He had seen groundlings suffer morning-after illnesses from too much drink or drugs; he hadn't known you could suffer the same result from too much emotion.

He stumbled out of Stone's bower and down the passage into the common area, only to discover he had an audience. Balm and Chime sat beside the hearth basin. From the blankets tumbled on the floor, they had slept here. Balm was staring at the heating stones, distracted and unhappy, pulling at a lock of her hair. Chime was huddled bleakly beside her, and didn't look as if he had slept particularly well, either.

They looked up as Moon stopped in the doorway. Balm started to speak, but before she could, Chime surged to his feet and said, "I didn't know. We didn't know."

Moon nodded. It hardly seemed to matter now. "Where's the new consort?"

Chime hesitated, but Balm pointed to the passage across the way. "Just down there, the third bower along."

Moon stepped past them and went down the passage.

One of the mentors must have renewed the shell-lights down in this unused section, because it was brighter than Moon remembered. He stopped in the doorway of the third bower. The young consort was awake and sitting on a mat near the hearth basin, wearing the same

dark-colored robe he had worn yesterday, without the concealing hood. His arms were folded and his shoulders hunched, though the room itself was warm enough. It was a good-sized bower but bare, empty except for a pile of folded blankets beneath the hanging bed and a small collection of packs and bags shoved against the wall. The place had the signs of a hasty cleaning, with a few stray dead leaves and damp spots left behind. As Moon stepped through the doorway, the consort glanced up, his eyes widening. He pushed to his feet.

He looked as young as Chime had implied, but though his body was almost too slender, his shoulders were broad; Moon thought he was probably past adolescence, if only just. His skin was a lighter bronze than usual for the Aeriats of Indigo Cloud or Emerald Twilight, and his hair was a light gold-brown. Next to him, Moon felt huge and awkward, as if he suddenly had too many bones and they were sticking out in the wrong places.

Moon said, "Who are you?" The young consort stared blankly at him, and Moon clarified, "What's your name?"

"Uh." He cleared his throat, and managed to blurt out, "I'm Ember, of Emerald Twilight, of the bloodline of Tempest and Fade."

Moon hadn't asked for a pedigree, but it was the way consorts were normally introduced. He supposed it was meant as a compliment that Tempest had handed over a consort from one of her own clutches, but Moon hadn't had terribly good luck with her offspring so far. "You're Ash's clutchmate?"

"No, we're not—We're only half—" Ember took a sharp breath, as if bracing himself. "Fade had something wrong with his heart when he was born, and the mentors couldn't heal it. They said it wouldn't be passed on to his clutches, so when he was old enough Tempest took him as her second consort so the court wouldn't lose his bloodline. But he only gave her one clutch before he died." Ember dropped his gaze, in an agony of self-consciousness. "Just me, and four warriors. But we're all healthy."

Moon rubbed his eyes and muttered a curse under his breath. He might be mature and fertile, but he's still practically a fledgling. A pampered and beloved fledgling, probably right up until the moment they tore him away from his brothers and sent him off to a foreign court with a terrible reputation. When Moon was that age, he had been experimenting with passing himself off as a groundling for longer periods of time, under more dangerous circumstances; and learning that he could use sex to get someone to be nice to him, for a while at least. And coming to terms with the fact that no place was entirely safe, that anyone could turn on him.

Weary past bearing, Moon said, “If you don’t want to stay up here alone, take the spiral stair at the west end of this level all the way down to the greeting hall. The hall just below it belongs to the teachers. They always have food there and they’ll take care of you.” He knew the teachers would take care of Ember, once they got a look at him; they had even taken care of Moon when he had first arrived, an unwanted feral solitary. That seemed like it was half a lifetime ago, not just the better part of a turn.

Ember looked up at him, wary but hopeful. Moon turned away, unable to take it a moment more.

He was in the doorway when Ember said, “Shadow said that I shouldn’t be afraid of you.”

Moon stopped. He had a surge of bitter jealousy for Shadow, secure in his court with more clutches than he could probably remember fathering. He said, “Shadow doesn’t know me.”

He left the bowers, avoiding the common area, finding his way through the back passages and out to the open gallery above the queens’ level and the central well. He shifted and jumped off, snapping his wings out to slow his fall, and landed on the floor of the greeting hall.

A group of warriors, Tempest and Zephyr’s attendants, sat grouped around the hearth basin near the fountain, watching him with wary curiosity. Ignoring them, he took the stairs down to the teachers’ hall. Several Arbora sat around the hearth, but Moon whipped past before anyone could try to speak to him and fled down the passage to the nurseries.

Outside the door with its carvings of fledglings and baby Arbora at play, he stopped and shifted to groundling. It was hard to make himself step through into the room beyond.

Inside was a big low-ceilinged chamber, well-lit, with a maze of smaller rooms opening off the main area, and several shallow fountain pools, each filled just enough to wash and play but not drown in. Most of the younger fledglings and Arbora were still asleep, curled up in nests of furs and blankets on the floor.

Bark crossed the main area, carrying a basket, still mussed with sleep herself. She saw Moon and stopped, staring. “Oh, Moon. I—”

“I need to see the royal clutch.”

She hesitated, but didn’t ask why. The word must have spread last night. “They’re asleep, but—” She bit her lip. “Yes, you’d better.”

She led him to a small room off the main area. The three royal

fledglings slept in a pile of blankets, surrounded by baskets, rag toys, and some carved wooden grasseater figures. Bark crouched beside the nest to gently wake the occupants. She separated out two warrior fledglings and an Arbora toddler, gathered them up despite sleepy protests and carried them away.

As she left, Frost, Thorn, and Bitter were sitting up, blinking and yawning. Thorn and Bitter were in their groundling forms, dressed in soft old hand-me-down shirts, and Frost was in her smaller Arbora form, her spines and frills looking oddly abbreviated. They didn't seem surprised to see Moon despite the early hour, and Bitter immediately tried to climb into his lap and go to sleep again. Moon sat him back down between Frost and Thorn. "I came to tell you that I have to go away for a little while."

Frost immediately went from soft and drowsy to wide awake and mutinous. "You can't leave. Who's going to teach Bitter to fly?"

"I don't have a choice." Moon took a deep breath, and forced the sharpness out of his tone. "When Stone comes back, he can teach Bitter."

There was a short startled silence. Reluctantly, Frost settled her ruffled spines. "Did someone steal the seed again?"

"No, nothing like that." Everyone else seemed to have forgotten that incident. Or instead of remembering Moon's place in it as the consort who helped find and retrieve the precious seed, he had somehow morphed into the consort who had just gone along for the flight. "You'll be fine here."

He thought he was doing fairly well at keeping his emotions off his face, but Frost exchanged an uneasy look with Bitter. Some communication seemed to pass between them, and Frost turned back to Moon. She said, "If you'll stay, Bitter will fly."

Bitter nodded gravely, with the attitude of someone making a terrible sacrifice for the greater good.

Moon rubbed his eyes. Oh fine, Bitter's been faking it all this time just for attention. You would think, as the smallest royal fledgling, Bitter had more attention than he could handle. But after what Bitter had been through, maybe no amount was enough. And Moon had thought raising fledglings was one of the few Raksuran things he might be good at. "So Bitter has been able to fly all this time."

Thorn shrugged uneasily and pulled Bitter into his lap. "Yes, but he's not good at it. The last time he tried, the Fell caught him. We went back to get him, and they caught us too."

So that explained it. Bitter buried his face against Thorn's arm. Moon had to squeeze his eyes shut for a moment before he could say, "I appreciate the offer, but I told you, I don't have a choice."

Thorn watched Moon carefully, his brow furrowed with increasing concern. He said, "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing. I have to visit another court for a while. I'll—" Moon meant to say I'll be back soon but the easy lie froze in his throat. He had been lying all his life, but for some reason the knack had deserted him just when he needed it the most. He finished, "I don't know when I'll be back."

Frost shook her head, in denial and protest. "But—"

"That's all, I have to leave now." He had to leave before he made a bigger mess of this than he already had. Before he could get up, Bitter lunged into his lap for a hug. So he held each of them for a moment, then made himself get up and leave the nursery.

He took the interior stairs up through the tree, avoiding the populated sections. When he reached the consorts' level, Chime and Balm were gone from the common area. He wasn't sure if that was a relief or not.

In his bower, Moon rummaged through the basket for things he would need if the new court took one look at him and threw him out immediately. He found a battered leather travel pack and put in a knife, some flints, spare clothes, the sash Rill had made him, a rolled-up waterskin and a thick blanket. He had arrived at Indigo Cloud with nothing, but he thought fighting the Fell and helping to recover the seed was worth at least this much.

Getting to his feet, he looked around the room. After a moment of arguing with himself, he picked up a tiny rag doll Thorn had made for him. It was just a twist of black cloth with a dried leathery palm leaf for wings, but he put it carefully in the bottom of the pack.

He left his gold consort's bracelet on the edge of the hearth basin.

Chapter Five

By the time Moon took the interior stairs down to the greeting hall, Tempest and Zephyr had joined their warriors. Jade was there as well, with Balm, Chime, and Heart. A number of Arbora watched from the balconies in the levels above, and warriors hung from every vantage point.

Despite that, it was very quiet in the hall.

As Moon walked toward the queens, Zephyr was saying, “No, I won’t be going to Opal Night. I’m returning to my court.”

Jade tilted her head and fixed her gaze on Tempest. “You’ve kept that to yourself.”

Tempest bristled. “You didn’t ask.”

Jade’s spines rose. “You let me assume you wouldn’t be taking this long journey alone with your warriors. And my consort.”

“You think I’ll take advantage?” Tempest laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

It wasn’t until then that Moon understood what they were talking about. He stopped and folded his arms, growling under his breath. At that moment, if he never saw a Raksuran queen again, it would be too soon.

In the quiet, the growl was perfectly audible. The conversation stopped abruptly and the whole group turned to stare at him.

With a wry tilt to her head, Zephyr said, “Somehow I don’t think that’s going to be a concern.”

Jade dismissed Tempest with a flick of her spines, and crossed the hall to stand in front of Moon. He didn’t think she would notice, but it was the first thing she saw. She lifted his bare wrist and rubbed her thumb over the pulse point. She met his eyes, her expression glum, and said, “If you accept another queen before I get there, I’ll kill you both.”

He freed his wrist. He refused to feel like he was the one rejecting her. “It’s a deal.”

Jade let out a huff of breath, bitterly amused. “That was good. I

think you just managed to insult your entire race and culture in one sentence.” She added deliberately, “I’ll leave for Opal Night tomorrow at dawn.”

Moon wanted to believe that so much it made his whole body hurt. But everything in his life up to this point said that this was the end, that he would never see her or any of the others again. Trying to struggle out from under the weight of the past was like drowning. After a strangled moment, he managed to choke out, “I’ll be waiting.”

Jade reached for him impulsively and Moon stepped back. He couldn’t look at her anymore, he couldn’t touch her. He had to be able to walk out of here, and not be dragged out screaming, trying to get his teeth into Tempest’s throat. Jade hesitated, then dropped her hand. “Do you want to say...I mean, talk to anyone?”

She meant say goodbye. Though he refused to look at them, Moon could feel Chime, Balm, and Heart staring at him, but he didn’t see any point to a formal farewell. If Jade was telling the truth, he would be back here soon, and if she wasn’t...He still didn’t see any point to it. “No.”

Tempest and Zephyr moved toward the passage to the knothole, and Moon turned to follow them.

There was still no sound or movement from any of the Arbora or Aeriats watching from above, and the silence burned into Moon’s back as he crossed the hall. He realized a very stupid part of him was hoping someone would yell “Stop!” at the last moment. His throat started to ache, choking him with an urge to do...something. Maybe wail in pain, the way Raksura expressed their grief.

He conquered the impulse, and followed the queens through the passage out of Indigo Cloud.



Zephyr took her warriors away toward Sunset Water, and Moon flew with Tempest and the others through the great green caverns of the suspended forest.

They passed through a light rain at midday, but the wind stayed calm. Tempest kept to an easy pace for the slower-flying warriors’ sake, and following her lead didn’t require much of Moon’s attention. He would have preferred a more difficult trip; the last thing he needed was time to think.

When the day’s light began to fail, Tempest slowed their flight and banked down to a platform high in the branches of a mountain-tree. The platform supported a stand of trees with bright green

canopies and white flowers, common to the forest. The Arbora called them puffblossoms, because the flowers dropped their seeds in delicate puffy globes that caught and traveled in the breeze. These were in seed now, and the whole platform was covered in drifts of white fluff.

Tempest and the warriors landed in the high grass at the edge of the stand, their wings stirring up a storm of delicate blossoms. Moon lighted a little distance away, rippling his spines to shake off the puffy seeds and folding his wings.

The others moved into the trees, to a spot where the grass was sparse, and spread out to scout the area. There was a pond there, fed by a fall of water from one of the mountain-tree's higher branches. Moon turned and walked away from the grove, toward a spot of flat bare moss and hard dirt at the edge of the run-off from the pond.

Across the canyon formed by the enormous canopies, another mountain-tree boasted larger platforms, some with open stretches of grass and others thickly clustered with smaller trees. As Moon focused on it, movement on one of the lower platforms resolved into a herd of furry grasseaters; probably the reason Tempest had picked this place to stop.

He glanced back at the camp. Three of the warriors had shifted to groundling and were sorting through the packs, shaking out blankets, filling a waterskin from the fall into the pond. The two others had kept their winged forms and had taken up guard positions in the puffblossom branches.

Moon didn't want to shift; he already felt too vulnerable, from the dangers of the suspended forest, from his companions. But his back ached from flying with tense muscles and he needed to rest. Reluctantly, he took his groundling form.

Losing the weight of his wings was a relief, and he stretched until his joints popped, then sat down beside the stream. He wasn't looking forward to the night. He hoped making it clear that he wanted to be alone would keep the warriors away from him. Of course, beating one or two of them senseless would keep them away from him too, but he didn't want to give Tempest an excuse to keep him from shifting.

He was watching the multi-colored snails inching along the wood at the water's edge when he sensed someone approaching. He looked up to see Tempest coming toward him.

Moon tensed, bracing himself to simultaneously shift and leap backward. Tempest stopped, dropped her spines and held up her hands, claws retracted. With an edge of ironic amusement in her

voice, she said, “Easy, I just want to talk.”

Moon settled reluctantly, watching her. She came closer, stopped about five paces away and eased down to sit on her heels so they were eye level. She said, with a trace of skepticism, “I find it hard to believe you became that attached to Indigo Cloud in such a short time.”

Moon bared his teeth, not in a smile. “It’s not as exciting as Emerald Twilight. No sister queens plotting to take over the court.”

Her jaw tightened, her spines shivered with the effort not to flare, and she looked away. After a long moment, she let her breath out, and flicked away a drift of puffblossom. “I asked for that.” Her voice was dry. “I’ve paid for it, too. I don’t have so many sisters that I can lose one. Even one who hated me.”

After their trading visit to Emerald Twilight, the warriors and Arbora had brought back a rumor that Ice had tried to exile Halcyon for plotting against Tempest and Ash, Halcyon had refused to go, and Tempest and Halcyon had settled the matter by fighting to the death. Though Moon had felt sorry for Ice and Shadow at the time, overall he thought it was good riddance. He thought Tempest deserved an honest answer as to his feelings now, so he said, “I don’t care.”

It surprised her and she glanced at him, lifting a brow. “You aren’t a shy one, are you.”

Moon just continued to regard her, certain that was probably intended as more of an insult than it sounded. Consorts his age were supposed to be shy and reserved, like Ember. Not sullen and reticent, like him. If Moon was just a little more suspicious, he might wonder if he had been lured out of the court so that Tempest could kill him, as revenge for what had happened with Halcyon. The only reason that wasn’t more than an idle thought was the fact that Tempest could have killed him anytime in the past day, with no one but her warriors the wiser; there was no reason to travel any further.

Apparently expecting more of a response, Tempest snorted in exasperation. “Are you planning to behave this way at Opal Night?”

Meaning she expected him to have to beg to be accepted. Moon knew how that would go. “I’ve lived in a Raksuran court for only six months out of more than forty turns. If you think I’m afraid to be alone, you’re wrong.”

Tempest frowned, the skepticism in her expression gradually giving way to something harder to read. “It’s your birthcourt. It’s the largest court of the far west Reaches. You don’t see this as an opportunity?”

An opportunity for what? He didn't know why Opal Night had demanded him, except that it was a way to exercise power over another court. If it was so large then it should have no need for extra consorts; if Moon was stuck there, the best he could expect was to be handed off to some unknown queen who was unlikely to consider a former feral solitary as any great prize. The worst...He didn't know what the worst would be. Though Tempest might. Watching her intently, he said, "Maybe they don't want a feral solitary in their bloodline."

Tempest drew back, spines lifting in affront. "What do you mean?"

"They left me to die in a forest when I was a fledgling. How do I know they don't want to finish what they started?"

Tempest hissed, surged to her feet in one fluid motion, spines rigid with contempt. "If you really believe that's even remotely possible, you know little of us."

Moon glared up at her. "I think I know too much of you."

Tempest lashed her tail, crouched and leapt upward. Two strong flaps took her up to one of the mountain-tree's lower branches. The gust of air stirred by her wings would have knocked Moon over, if he hadn't braced himself.

From the shelter of the puffblossom trees, the warriors stared.

Moon let out his breath and flicked water over the snails. Apparently he had won; he didn't feel proud of the victory.

Later, Tempest sent two of the warriors over to the grasseaters grazing on the platforms of the other mountain-tree to take a kill. They divided the meat up among the whole group, and Moon made himself eat, even though he wasn't hungry. The light rain returned as full darkness fell, and the warriors put up a couple of thin stretches of fabric for a shelter. The cloth was treated with a kind of tree sap to keep the water from soaking through it.

Tempest and her female warriors Beacon and Prize took one tent, with Moon ordered to take the other, with two of the male warriors for company. The fifth warrior was set on watch, the others to trade out with him during the night.

It was full dark by the time Moon ducked into the tent, and the two warriors, Dart and Gust, were already occupying one end of the space. At least he didn't have to look at them, though the scent of unfamiliar Aeriat put his nerves on edge. He had been too long in Indigo Cloud, where everyone was familiar, even if he didn't like all of

them.

As Moon crouched down and felt for a good sleeping spot in the moss and dirt, Dart said, "So this is the consort Halcyon was willing to kill for? I'm not impressed."

Gust hissed a laugh. "Maybe he learned some tricks living with groundlings."

Moon found a soft, not too wet place to lie down, and settled into it. He thought about how tormenting this behavior would be for a sheltered consort like Ember, and said, "If you touch me while I'm asleep, I'll kill you both. I'll tell Tempest a bowelripper got you." He leaned forward, and said with hard emphasis, "You'll look like a bowelripper got you."

Dart and Gust froze into frightened silence. Moon curled up, using his pack as a pillow, and went to sleep.



That was how it went for the next three days of travel. The nights were wet and uncomfortable in the mostly inadequate shelter they found, and none of them got much rest. After the first night with Dart and Gust, the warriors tended to treat Moon with wary respect. They kept their distance, Moon ignored them, and Tempest didn't speak to him except about the bare necessities of travel. Moon preferred it this way, but it left him with far too much time to think.

One topic that took up a lot of his time was the possibility of being alone again. If his pessimism proved accurate and Jade didn't come for him, he would have to leave the Reaches as soon as possible. Raksura who were alone were assumed to be solitaires exiled from their courts for some intolerable act. A solitary consort would be assumed to be a murderer, groundling-eater, or worse. He would be better off in a groundling city, somewhere like the Golden Islands.

For a while he thought about that, about traveling east to the Yellow Sea, seeing if Delin and Niran needed a Raksura on their exploring and trading trips. But it was a long way to travel alone, and if he got there only to find there was no permanent place for him...It was a depressing prospect.

And Flower, with almost her last breath, had asked him not to give up on the Raksura. It was a promise he had made without any idea of how hard it would be to keep.



On the afternoon of the fourth day, they stopped to hunt big grasseaters on one of the platforms. At least the others did; they had

made it plain that Moon's help was not welcome. So he sprawled napping on a branch and didn't see what happened until the shouts of alarm woke him.

He jerked upright to see the herd of grasseaters, furry rumps rolling as they ran, vanish into the trees at the far end of the platform. Near this end, Dart struggled frantically, one leg caught by a dark green creature, toad-like but nearly the size of the big grasseaters. It had risen out of a concealed dirt burrow in the heavy moss. Prize, the youngest female warrior, was on the ground, dodging clawed swipes from the creature's free hand, trying to strike at its face. She misjudged and the creature slammed her across the platform. Moon snarled a curse and leapt off the branch, snapped his wings out to propel himself down as fast as possible. He thought, This is what happens to idiot warriors who don't know how to hunt safely.

Moon landed on the creature's scaly back, all his claws extended. It roared in pain, stopped trying to drag Dart into its mouth, and dropped him to reach back for Moon. Moon jerked his wings up to shield his head, flared his spines and found the spot he was looking for, a soft vulnerable patch just under the lower edge of its skull. Ground predators who looked like this usually had one. It grabbed a handful of his spines just as he stabbed his claws through the softer patch of skin and cut through what he was fairly certain was an artery.

Its grip went loose and it shuddered under him, then slumped. Moon leapt backward off it, then warily circled around the body, watching for signs of life. When its eyes went dim, he turned to look for Dart and Prize.

Tempest and the others were just swooping in to land. Dart stood over Prize, who had shifted to groundling and huddled in the flattened grass, eyes closed and teeth gritted, her face twisted in pain. Moon hopped closer, realizing her right shoulder was dislocated. He hissed in sympathy; he knew more about wing joint injuries than he wanted to. The shock of the impact must have sent her into groundling form, making the injury worse. It didn't look like a break, but it looked bad enough.

"Are you hurt?" Tempest asked Dart.

He shook his head, clearly miserable. "Prize tried to help me and it got her. The consort—"

"I saw it," Tempest interrupted. She gave Moon an opaque look. "You're all right?"

Moon shook his spines out. "Yes."

“She can’t go on,” Beacon said. She crouched hurriedly to hold Prize’s shoulders as Prize retched in pain. Beacon looked up at Tempest worriedly. “She needs a mentor.”

Tempest nodded, her spines flicking. “Viridian Sea is close enough that we can reach it by nightfall. We’ll go there.”

Moon offered, “I’ll carry her.” He was about to add that if he and Tempest went on ahead, leaving the others to follow, they could probably get Prize there in half the time.

But Tempest said sharply, “No. We take care of our own.”

Moon bit back a hiss, insulted. “Fine. Next time I’ll let the predator eat him.”

Tempest ignored him, though the male warriors exchanged sulky glances.

Tempest carried Prize herself as they flew toward Viridian Sea, and Moon had time to realize why she was angry. Tempest hadn’t taken care of her own, and Moon had. If Moon had been a warrior, even one from a foreign court, it wouldn’t have been an issue. But he was a consort technically under Tempest’s protection, who clearly didn’t need that protection.

Jade had never seemed to mind, or at least never showed it. Maybe it was different because he had been Jade’s consort, so everything he did was somehow to her credit, since she had chosen him.

It was nice to have finally figured that out, now that it was too late.



The heavy rain started about midway through the flight, and they arrived at Viridian Sea well after nightfall, guided in by the colony’s lights. It wasn’t in a mountain-tree, but was built out of some knobby bulbous growth of wood nestled in the branches of a mountain-thorn. It was smaller and less thorny than the one Emerald Twilight inhabited, but still tricky to fly through in the dark.

By the time they reached the landing platform built out from the colony’s main entrance, the court was aware of them, and warriors and Arbora had come out to investigate. Fortunately, Viridian Sea seemed to be fairly reasonable, as far as Raksuran courts went. As soon as the warriors realized there was an injury, the reigning queen herself came down to rush them through the greeting process, so within moments they were ushered out of the rain and into the large wooden chamber of the colony’s greeting hall. Prize was helped away

by mentors, accompanied by Beacon.

Moon stood to the side while the Viridian Sea queen and Tempest finished the greeting. He thought this colony might be fairly new; the hall was modest, with only two high-ceilinged levels, four passages opening off it, and the carvings in the walls looked fresh under the glow of the spell-lights. There were some flowering vines trained to cross the ceiling but no fountains or falls of water.

This court might be small, but it seemed healthy. The warriors and Arbora crowding the passages to get a look at the visitors had groundling forms that weren't much different from those at Indigo Cloud and Emerald Twilight, most with bronze or copper skin and dark hair, though there was a distinctive strain of red-blond mixed into their bloodline.

Moon just hoped they got offered a meal, since they hadn't eaten their fill for two days. He had shifted to groundling along with the warriors, his clothes were dripping wet, and he felt grubby and tired. Bored, he scuffed his heel on the smooth wood floor, then realized the others had stopped speaking. He looked up to see the Viridian Sea warriors and Arbora staring at him expectantly. Amaranth, the queen, had her head tilted toward him in inquiry. "Your consort?" she prompted Tempest.

"No." Tempest stiffened slightly but managed not to sound horrified at the thought. "We're conducting him to Opal Night."

Amaranth, who was somewhat older and larger than Tempest, flicked a spine, and the atmosphere in the hall grew distinctly colder. Moon figured that with the injured warrior having been taken care of, both queens had remembered that they were Raksura and therefore hated each other on sight. Amaranth said, "I assume he has a name."

Tempest flicked a spine back at her. "He's Moon, of Indigo Cloud."

Amaranth stepped toward him and Moon twitched back, ready to bolt for the exit. But she stopped and tasted the air. "He's been taken." She tilted her head toward Tempest again. "Not by you."

Tempest grimaced. "It's a long story."

Amaranth settled her spines and clearly made the difficult decision not to take violent offense. She said, "Then we'll sit down, and you'll tell it."

Moon groaned inwardly, resigned to a long evening of tension and stares.

They were led into another hall, this one a little smaller. It was

less drafty and had a large bowl hearth with warming stones. The band of carved flowers and trees just below the curve of the ceiling looked older and more finished.

As Moon looked for a place to sit, a consort dropped out of the ceiling and landed at Amaranth's side. He was almost as tall as she was. He kept his winged form long enough to make sure the visitors had registered his size, then he shifted to groundling. In this form he didn't show any of the telltales of age: his bronze skin and dark hair hadn't started to gray yet. But there was a weight of gold bracelets and bands on his wrists and arms, the outward signs of Amaranth's regard. He caught Moon's gaze, making it clear he was speaking only to him, and said, "I'm Flint, first consort to Amaranth. Will you come to our hall?"

Streak, standing nearest to Moon, actually put a hand on his arm as if to stop him. Moon pulled away, baring his teeth in warning when Streak tried to reach for him again. Tempest hissed at Streak in barely suppressed fury, of the "you are embarrassing me" variety. Streak stepped back, confused.

Given a choice between going off with an unfamiliar consort in a strange court, or sitting here with the others and watching Tempest and Amaranth provoke each other, Moon didn't have to think twice. He stepped around Streak and followed Flint down the nearest passage.

They had only gone up two winding turns before Flint stopped and faced Moon. The passage wasn't empty; they were surrounded by ten or so worried Arbora. "Are they stealing you?" Flint asked bluntly.

"What?" Moon stared, taken aback. Then he realized what this must look like; consorts never traveled without queens they had either been taken by or were related to. He wished he was being stolen; then he could just kill Tempest and the others in their sleep and go home.

It was tempting for a moment to say "yes," just to see what would happen. But Moon thought it would cause more trouble for Viridian Sea in the end than it would for Tempest. "No," he admitted.

It must have sounded reluctant, because Flint lifted his brows skeptically. "Are you sure?"

Unable to muster any convincing sincerity, Moon just said, "It's a long story."

Flint accepted that with a nod. He motioned an Arbora over and instructed her to go back and let Amaranth know everything was all right, then he led Moon to the consorts' hall.

It was comfortable, though not as large and luxurious as Indigo Cloud's consorts' quarters. The hall itself was small but cozy and well supplied with cushions, and there was an attached bathing room and five bowers connected to it.

Moon did have to tell the story, but the good thing was that he got to eat right away, whereas Tempest and the others would probably be expected to make polite conversation for a considerably longer time, until Amaranth got over her pique. The food was served in the consorts' hall and Moon ate with Flint and three other consorts, one belonging to a sister queen and two untaken, the youngest looking as if he was just out of fledglinghood. There was tea, fruit, bread, and haunches of raw grasseater. While devouring freshly killed prey in the forest had its attractions, this was much more restful. Moon told them the truth, though he didn't emphasize how long he had been alone in the east, leaving them to draw their own conclusions about when Indigo Cloud had found him.

He expected them to ask about that, but instead Flint said, hesitantly, "Your queen let you go?"

It was unexpectedly hard to answer. It took Moon a surprisingly long time to get the "yes" out. Flint and the sister queen's consort exchanged a look; the two younger consorts stared at Moon with wide-eyed sympathy.

He had to turn away, the tightness in his throat making it suddenly hard to get a whole breath. The hostility and contempt from Tempest and her warriors had been easy to take; the concern of these people almost undid him.



Moon had been offered a spot in one of the hanging beds, but took the furs next to the hearth in the hall instead. After a while, the second youngest consort came down and joined him, easing up against his back, and placing a gentle and tentative bite on Moon's shoulder. Moon had been among Raksura long enough to know this was an offer of sex. He didn't respond, but he didn't chase the other consort away, either. He liked the company but had decided never to have sex again; it was too hard on the emotions.

After a hopeful pause, the other consort nuzzled Moon's shoulder and settled down to sleep. A little later, the youngest one, apparently feeling left out, came down and insinuated himself between Moon and the hearth, cuddling against his chest. He still smelled enough like a fledgling to make Moon's heart twist. He didn't think he would be able to fall asleep, but he did, and slept better than he had since

leaving Indigo Cloud.



They spent three days in Viridian Sea, waiting for the mentors to judge Prize ready to fly again. Moon spent the time with the consorts, going out to fly around the outside of the colony with them, exploring the hanging gardens inside their smaller but still intricate mountain-thorn. He heard the history of their amicable split with their mother court, and how they had reclaimed this old colony, once just a hunting outpost. It turned out that they had a line-grandfather too, but he spent most of his time at their old colony, and they seldom saw him. Some Arbora came up to join them in the afternoons and evenings, to tell stories and read aloud. It made Moon reconsider his decision not to live at Opal Night, if the worse came to worst. If the consorts there were this friendly, it wouldn't be so bad.

If worse didn't come to worst and Jade had left when she said she would, she would be two days ahead of them by now.

The one thing he hadn't expected to do was to miss Indigo Cloud so much. He had been leaving people all his life, to the point where all the turns seemed like an uninterrupted progression of departures, and there had been people he had missed terribly. But this was a never-ending ache in his chest, and every thought of Jade, Stone, Chime, Balm, the fledglings, Heart, Bell, Merit, Rill, Bark, Bone, Blossom, the other Arbora, was an active pain. You'll get over it, he told himself. You always get over it.

But somehow, this time was different.

Finally, on the morning of the fourth day at Viridian Sea, Moon reluctantly left the consorts to join Tempest and her warriors. Tempest acknowledged his existence with a nod and an opaque expression; the warriors looked grumpy. He suspected their accommodations hadn't been nearly as comfortable as his. Before Moon had left the consorts' hall, Flint had told him not to worry, that everything would surely be all right. He had said it with the unconvinced air of someone who knew it wasn't true but had no intention of saying what he really thought, but Moon appreciated it anyway.

They set out again, flying to the west.



It rained every day, lightly enough to fly through but still making for miserable nights. As they traveled, the forest gradually changed, the mountain-trees growing further apart and the ground between becoming increasingly studded with rocky outcrops. The outcrops

grew gradually taller, until they formed pillars reaching up to the height of the taller platforms of the suspended forest. The pillars were sculpted by the wind and rain into slim spirals, the rock dark gray but shot through with veins of silver that caught the light and threw back rainbow reflections.

Tempest had grudgingly admitted that she had never been this far west before, and was now navigating solely by a map that Ice had shown her. The warriors, having never seen country like this, grew uneasy. Moon, with nothing better to do and his own nerves eating away at him, took to dropping hints about various horrible Raksura-eating creatures he had encountered under similar circumstances. Some of the stories were actually true.

Everywhere they stopped, Moon searched unobtrusively for signs that Jade was ahead of them somewhere, but found none, and the rain obscured any scent that might have been left behind. They did find signs of a camp on one of the platforms where they landed to rest, but it was months old. Gust nudged the remains of the fire pit with his foot claws, asking hopefully, "We must be close? One or two more days?"

They had to be close to the edge of the Reaches. For the past day or so, the mountain-trees had been further apart and the platforms mostly bare of anything but grass. The forest floor seemed to have more rock pillars than greenery, as if the mountain-trees had been slowly encroaching on some stony expanse, and hadn't had time yet to finish the job. "We've made good time," Tempest admitted. "We might get there late tomorrow."

Moon didn't look for opportunities to terrorize the warriors that night; he was dreading their arrival while being so impatient for it he couldn't think straight.

But on the next day, thunder rumbled all through the morning, threatening to slow their progress. Heavy rain started in the late afternoon.

After they had fought it for a while, Tempest landed on a branch, sheltered only by the mountain-tree's canopy high above. She raised her voice to be heard over the rush of rain, saying, "I think we're almost there. We can either spend time searching for shelter, or try to make the colony."

Beacon glanced around at the warriors, gauging their stamina rather than taking their opinion. Moon, a much stronger flyer, was tired from fighting the wind, so they had to be feeling the strain. They stood with their spines drooping, dripping, and probably miserable,

but none of them looked ready to drop from exhaustion. Beacon said, "I think we'd rather sleep dry tonight."

Dart and one or two of the others nodded agreement. Tempest cocked her head at Moon. He shrugged. On his own, he would have stopped and found a place to hide and wait out the thunder, but he wasn't going to show that weakness in front of them.

So they flew on through the rain. Moon had hoped that they could out-fly the storm, but it seemed to cover half the Reaches, pounding down as the afternoon stretched toward evening and the gray light grew more dim.

Moon was beginning to doubt the accuracy of Tempest's ability to estimate distance. Then thunder crashed and lightning washed the sky in white. Moon flinched so hard he lost control of his wings, and the wind spun him down and sideways. Copper scales flashed in his peripheral vision, right before one of the warriors slammed into him.

Instinct took over and Moon pulled his wings up to prevent a collision that could have broken bones. He grabbed wildly, caught the flailing warrior by the collar flange and yelled, "Stop flapping, idiot!"

The warrior snapped in his wings in reflex and clung to Moon's arms. It was Gust, dazed and frightened but sensible enough to go limp and let Moon help him.

With a couple of hard flaps Moon righted them, his head pounding from the crash of thunder that still reverberated in his bones. Shaking the rain out of his eyes, he looked for the others and saw they were flapping hard to catch the wind again, with Tempest banking back toward them. She saw Moon had Gust and motioned him toward the branches of the nearest mountain-tree.

Carrying Gust, Moon followed her in and landed on the broad branch a few paces down from the other shaken warriors. He set Gust on his feet and shouted over the dying rumble of thunder, "We have to stop!"

Tempest stepped close, taking Gust's arm and peering into his face to make sure he was all right. Satisfied, she pointed to the south with one wing tip. The rain nearly drowning her voice, she said, "The colony is just down there!"

Startled, Moon turned to look. At the mouth of the valley, dark against the gray sky, huge stone pillars stretched up from a rocky ridge that formed a giant ring, much of it overgrown with vines and smaller trees. It enclosed a huge mountain-tree, but it was a hideously deformed one. Some past cataclysm had split the enormous structure

in two, so half of the trunk leaned into the ridge, the malformed canopy reaching for the sky but at a steep angle, creating twisted branches and huge gaps. The other half of the trunk still stood, but the bare branches jutting from it showed it was long dead.

With all that to take in, it took Moon a moment to realize what else was wrong: there were no lights visible in either of the two trees. No steady white-gold glow from enspelled shells or stones or flowers, no warm glints of firelight. He said, "Are you sure they're alive?"

He hadn't meant it to sound facetious, but Tempest apparently took it that way. She snapped her spines at him and leapt off the branch. The warriors, caught by surprise and still recovering, followed in a belated rush. Moon took a deep breath and dove after them.

As they drew closer, Moon still saw no signs of life, though the heavy rain made it hard to make out details. The dying gray light threw the surrounding ridges of rock into deep shadow, but as they flew over the stony barrier, all the vegetation he could see was wild and untended, the same heavy green tangle of vines and moss and saplings that covered the forest floor. Inside the bowl of rock, the wind formed tricky currents and the ground was covered by a mass of giant mountain-tree roots, groves of small trees, and tumbled piles of rock. The slanting trunk of the living half of the tree still showed no hint of occupation. No lights, no movement. The platforms cradled in the branches were overgrown and slumping under the weight of wild vegetation. Moon hoped Tempest knew where she was going; the bowl was the size of a small valley and there was no sign of sentries, no indication of where the landing platform for visitors might be. It didn't look like a place that wanted visitors.

Then Tempest spiraled down toward the lower half of the slanting trunk, and banked sideways. Following her lead, Moon saw it too: where the bulk of the bole rested against the rock, two small steady lights shone against a dark opening. There really is a court here, he thought.

They dropped down toward the platform. The tree had grown into and partially through the ridge, and the two spell-lights revealed a circular stone platform extending out from the trunk where ribs of wood had enclosed chunks of rock. The tree overhung the platform enough that it sheltered them from the worst of the downpour, allowing only a light drizzle to reach them.

It wasn't until his claws touched down on the slab of stone that the shadows shifted and Moon realized the rock woven through the tree's bark was carved stone. Gray faces, pieces of arms, shoulders, torsos poked out between the sections of glossy wood. The light on

either side of the open doorway blossomed on stones carved into the shapes of lotus flowers. It was impossible to tell if the fragmented statues had been meant to represent Raksura or groundlings. Moon couldn't see much of the ridge half-buried under the looming trunk, but now he wondered if without all the clinging greenery it would look smooth or terraced; this ancient mountain-tree might have sprouted in the middle of an even older groundling ruin.

They all shook the water off their spines and scales. A faint scrape of claws on rock brought Moon's attention back to the trunk's entrance. A door deep inside it had opened and let out a wash of warm light and a slim figure.

Tempest turned her head to hiss at her warriors, reminding them of their manners. They all shifted to groundling, though the wary tension in the way they stood showed none of them were happy about it. Beacon glanced at Moon and motioned impatiently at him, as if he could somehow miss the fact that he was supposed to shift too. He hissed under his breath, gritted his teeth, and let his winged form slip away, the water left on his scales transferring to his clothes.

The warrior who stepped out of Opal Night's doorway was slim and strong, dark hair pulled back from her face, the light catching glints in her dark bronze skin. Her clothes were ordinary, a shirt belted over loose pants, the colors in faded shades of red. Her expression was studiously neutral. She said, "I am Rise, of Opal Night."

Beacon stepped forward to Tempest's side. She said, "I'm Beacon, of Emerald Twilight. Our sister queen greets you, and brings the consort from Indigo Cloud."

Rise tensed almost imperceptibly, and her gaze went to the warriors behind Tempest and Beacon, dismissed them, then to Moon. He felt a tickle of unease travel down his spine. It was generally hard to tell a young consort's groundling form from a warrior's, and Moon, dressed in somewhat worn clothes and not wearing any jewelry, had nothing to set him apart. But somehow Rise had known immediately he was the consort.

He had been expecting indifference, or perhaps just hoping for it. In a few heartbeats he was going to have to walk through that door into a court who had gone to some trouble to get him here, and he had no idea why.

Rise said, "We hadn't expected you would arrive so soon." She sounded more disconcerted than pleased by it. After a moment she added, "Please come inside," and turned to lead the way through the

dark doorway.

She didn't say anything about Jade, Moon thought. If Jade was already here, surely Opal Night would have expected Tempest to arrive before now. It was hard not to ask; he knew he was supposed to keep quiet until he was acknowledged by a reigning queen or taken away by another consort. The friendly reception at Viridian Sea had made him more reluctant to break rules and act the part of crazy solitary here. He followed Tempest and the others inside, hoping to find a way to get the question in without alienating half the court.

They went through the dark passage and the doorway beyond. The opening was large enough for a line-grandfather to pass through without ducking, and led into an equally large hall, bare except for the intricate carvings on the walls. A few rock-lights on the floor reflected red light off the polished wood, but the upper portion of the room was cloaked in shadow.

Three other warriors waited there, all young males, all with a close enough resemblance to Rise to be her clutchmates. They glanced at the Emerald Twilight warriors, but picked Moon out as easily as Rise had, staring at him with nervous intensity.

The hall was quiet, though Moon sensed movement somewhere above. The air was cool and smelt strongly of wood, earth, and of strange Raksura.

Rise said, "Our daughter queen would greet you, but she's away from the colony tonight."

The skin on Tempest's back rippled as she sternly controlled her spines. It was mildly diverting to watch Beacon struggle not to look offended. This was obviously not a problem Emerald Twilight encountered often. "Perhaps a sister queen is available?"

Rise hesitated, as if reluctant to admit it. "There is a sister queen here—our court has two primary bloodlines—but the situation is... complex."

Beacon glanced at Tempest, uncertain. As Moon understood it, queens weren't supposed to speak until they were greeted by another queen. Before the situation became even more awkward, Rise added, "But the reigning queen of our bloodline will greet you." She looked at Moon again as if she couldn't help herself, her gaze quickly returning to Beacon. "I know she has been very anxious for your arrival, and to be reunited with the only surviving consort from her last clutch."

Moon felt as if someone had punched him in the head. He was

dimly aware that Tempest and Beacon had exchanged a startled glance, that Tempest looked back at him with a newly assessing eye.

His mother was alive, and the reigning queen of this court.

Chapter Six

Your mother is alive, Moon thought, just to hear the words again. It was suddenly hard to take a full breath. Moon had thought Opal Night regarded him as just a token in Raksuran court games, a way to take a slap at Emerald Twilight and Indigo Cloud. It was clear that was how Tempest had seen the situation.

Moving by reflex more than conscious effort, Moon followed with the others as Rise led the way to the end of the hall and the high-ceilinged passage beyond it. It curved around and then slanted upward. They walked under balconies and past smaller doorways. He heard faint sounds of movement, voices, the distant rush of water.

Somehow he hadn't expected this, that anyone here would be closely related to him. He didn't know what he had expected, but it wasn't that.

As a fledgling, lost, alone, and hating every instant of it, he had fantasized about this moment. He had given up on ever having it a long time ago.

He wasn't sure he wanted to have it now.

These are the people who abandoned you, left Sorrow, Leaf, Bliss, Fern, and Light to die. They didn't bring you here because they wanted you back, he reminded himself. But his heart pounded in anticipation.

Moon caught a hint of movement ahead, right before he saw a female Arbora standing in a doorway. She could have been one of the Arbora from Indigo Cloud: short, strongly built, with the same dark hair and bronze skin as Rise. She wore a light tunic and pants, and as they passed the doorway Moon saw younger Arbora crowded behind her. As she saw him, her eyes widened, and she turned abruptly to say something to the others with her. The excited whispers were lost as they continued down the passage. Moon couldn't make out the words.

The walls changed suddenly, with stretches of gray stone woven in between lengths of wood. They had to be passing into the section of the trunk that had grown into the stony ridge. Then one wall opened out to a dark space, what Moon first thought was a view of the outside. Then Tempest stopped, her spines twitching in surprise.

Rise noticed her reaction, and said, "That's the central well of the tree."

As Moon's eyes adjusted he saw it was a hollowed-out portion of the mountain-tree, slanted where the trunk lay against the ridge of stone. Even in the dim light he could tell the space was enormous. Far larger than Indigo Cloud's central well, it extended much further through the bulk of the tree. The walls of dark wood were ringed with balconies, all shrouded in green vines. From the upper section, high above their heads, a waterfall tumbled straight down to a pool far below. There must be openings to the outside somewhere above, because a light mist of rain was falling.

And through the obscuring greenery, lights glowed in the dimness, randomly speckling the whole interior of the tree. This court is huge, Moon thought. He could catch faint scents in the cool damp air, flowers and some smoky incense, and many strange Raksura. Suddenly the bleak appearance of the outside of the mountain-tree, the overgrown and deserted platforms, made sense. It's deliberate, for defense. No one passing by would have any idea a Raksuran court lived here, let alone such a large one.

Tempest exchanged a look with Beacon. Turning back to Rise, Beacon said, "It's a very fine colony; the rumors of the size of your court were not exaggerated."

Rise said, with a trace of hardness in her voice, "We have had much to overcome in the past turns, and our queens felt the need for the strength of numbers."

Beacon frowned, puzzled. "Of course."

They continued on. Not far ahead the passage opened into a large room shaped like an overturned bowl. Carvings of warriors in flight climbed the curving walls, touched with the gleam of inset gems. The image in the center of the roof was a queen, her wings and tail curled into a circle. Two other passages curved away from it, wide archways framed by the downswept wings of two carved consorts.

The room below the magnificent carving was empty, though there were cushions laid out around the raised stone bowl of the hearth. It didn't look like anyone else had been greeted here recently, but then Jade might have arrived more than a day ago.

Rise gestured for them to sit as the warriors with her brought out a kettle and a tea set. Moon sank down onto a cushion in the back, behind Tempest and Beacon, with the other Emerald Twilight warriors ranged around. His clothes were damp and the room was cold, as if the warming stones had only been hurriedly dumped into the hearth.

His throat was dry and he was glad he wouldn't have to speak until the queens finished greeting each other.

He didn't know what he was going to say. He didn't even know what he wanted to say.

Rise helped her three warriors hand out pottery cups of tea, then all four withdrew politely to the other side of the room.

Beacon leaned over to Tempest and whispered, "Well, that explains why a court this important was so anxious to get him back." She jerked her head to indicate Moon, in case there was any doubt. "Do you think Indigo Cloud knew all along?"

Tempest flicked a spine in dismissal. "If they had, they would have taken advantage of it before this."

Moon turned the warm cup around, looking down into the delicate yellow tea. He just wished they would get on with it already.

The other warriors leaned over to listen to Tempest and Beacon, and Streak eased forward a little to join the conversation. "If she hasn't had a clutch since he was born, maybe there's a problem in their bloodline, and they need him for breeding?"

Moon rubbed his eyes, conquering the impulse to shift and bite Streak's throat out. It wasn't a bad theory; Indigo Cloud had had problems with disease in the turns when they had been under Fell influence, which had caused the court to dwindle to its current size. But it meant nothing good for Moon. It keeps coming back to that. If he wasn't infertile, he could help them. But if he wasn't infertile, Indigo Cloud would want him back. If he was infertile, no court would want him.

"But this is such a big court," Prize added. "Even if there's been disease—"

Scaled wings rustled from the doorway opposite them. Everyone glanced around, startled. Rise pushed hurriedly to her feet and went into the passage to talk to whoever stood there. Moon set the cup down before he could spill it. His heart pounded, probably loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

But Rise returned alone, her expression tense with agitation. "I'm sorry," she said, "the queen can't greet you tonight."

Tempest was so floored her spines didn't even twitch. She said, "Is there some problem? Did we cause offense?"

It was a violation of the greeting customs, but Rise replied directly to her. "No, not that. It's just..." It was clear Rise didn't know

what it was. “I’m sorry. I’ll take you to the guest quarters immediately.”

Tempest hesitated, then got to her feet, gesturing for the others to follow. Moon stood, torn between disappointment and relief at postponing the confrontation.

Rise led them away, down another passage that wound through several complicated turns. They passed near a section of living quarters, and Arbora and warriors peeked curiously at them from doorways and balconies. Then they climbed a set of winding stone stairs.

At the top, Rise went through a doorway to a large room that was partly made of stone, partly of dark wood. The ceiling was overgrown with heavy roots, bigger around than barrels, and entwined with vines. More big roots formed pillars, as if supporting the low arches of the ceiling. Instead of hanging bower beds, there were square stone benches scattered about, padded with furs and blankets. The floor was wood patched with stone, with a round hearth standing almost knee-high instead of a basin.

Rise said, “These are the guest quarters. The passage there leads to a bathing room. I hope you will be comfortable.”

Tempest nodded graciously. “I’m sure we will.”

Someone had obviously hurried ahead to ready the rooms; there were warming stones in the hearth and some of the carved stone knobs standing out from the walls had been spelled for light. Moon crossed the room to see it extended far enough to have broad windows opening into the dark space of the central well. There was no sign of any other current or previous occupants, and it didn’t smell like anyone he knew, but then a colony this big must have more than one set of rooms for guests.

Rise hesitated, as if there was more she wanted to say but didn’t quite dare, but then she ducked her head. “I’ll tell the reigning queen you’re settled here.”

Moon decided to just ask; the greeting ritual had all gone to piss anyway, and they couldn’t blame him for that. “Rise, are there any other visitors? A group from Indigo Cloud was coming here.”

Rise stared at him, taken aback, but then said, “No, consort, I’m sorry. No one else has come.”

Moon’s throat went tight. He had really been expecting her to say Jade was here, or had been here and been turned away, told to come back later, something.

Confused, Rise added, "But the weather has been terrible for flying for the past few days. If they were coming here they may have been delayed."

"I'm sure that's the case," Tempest said. Her voice was smooth but her spines were quivering in anger. "Thank you."

Rise nodded, threw another worried look at Moon, and made her way out.

Beacon turned accusingly to Moon. "You spoke to her. Don't you know—"

"Everybody spoke to her," he said, and it came out as a growl.

Beacon stepped back, and all the other warriors twitched and stared at him warily. Tempest, in the middle of drawing a breath to speak, stopped and settled her spines. After a moment, she said, "I doubt it will matter. If their queens won't greet visitors, they can hardly accuse us of rudeness."

Moon knew he had given away much more than he had meant to. Furious at himself, at Beacon, Tempest, everyone and everything, he went to the front of the room near the hearth and tossed his pack down on the bench that was closest to the side wall. His thoughts were bouncing from Jade lied to me to something happened on the way here and Jade's dead, with Chime and Balm and whoever else was with her to something happened at the colony before they left and they're all dead.

An uneasy silence settled over the room.

After a long moment, Beacon cleared her throat and said quietly to Tempest, "So this court really has two dominant bloodlines."

"I had heard that rumor," Tempest said. "But I didn't put much credit in it before now."

Prize looked at Moon. "If he's really the only consort from the reigning queen's last clutch, why didn't she come out?"

Then Dart said, "She saw him."

Gust snorted a laugh, as if it was a joke, and Beacon gave him a weary look.

Dart protested, "It's true. The queen started to come in, saw him, and left."

The others went quiet. Moon flushed cold, staring at Dart. He said, "You're lying."

Dart twitched uneasily, but said, "No. I saw her. She was dark

green, that's all I could tell. She looked right at you."

Moon turned away and felt every nerve in his body pull as tight as wire.

No one said anything. Tempest stirred uneasily, and said, "Dart, that's enough."

In the quiet, Moon heard footsteps coming down the corridor. He hoped for an instant it was Jade, arriving late. Then Rise and several Arbora stepped into the room.

The Arbora carried platters of raw meat and baskets of fruit and bread. The warriors perked up, immediately interested.

The Arbora set the food down near the hearth and one put a kettle on the warming stones, then most withdrew. Rise nodded politely to Tempest and Beacon. There were three Arbora behind her, an older female who stood patiently waiting, and two younger males who craned their necks to see around Rise. They were wearing robes, red-brown and silver gray, probably hastily thrown on over other clothes, if Indigo Cloud's reaction to unexpected visitors was anything to judge by. One of the younger Arbora spotted Moon and nudged the other with an elbow. They both stared until the older woman glanced at them and hissed. Abashed, both retreated into the passage.

Speaking directly to Tempest again, Rise said, "The reigning queen of our bloodline thought that the consort might be more comfortable in a bower with more privacy."

Now everyone turned to stare at him. Right, Moon thought, bitterly amused. He could choose between the hospitality of a queen who had been disgusted at the sight of him or Tempest and her noisy, ignorant warriors. He said, "No."

Tempest turned back to Rise and said, "He thanks the reigning queen for her kind offer, but declines to accept it."

Rise frowned. The Arbora behind her exchanged looks of consternation. Rise pressed her lips together, obviously struggling with a reply, then finally said, "I see. I will give the queen his answer."

Rise left and the last three Arbora trailed reluctantly after her. Moon heard them break out into a tense whispered conversation further down the hall, but he couldn't make out the words. Everyone just stood around uneasily for a moment, then Tempest lowered her spines in resignation. "We've food and a dry place to sleep, and hopefully there's hot water in the bathing room; take advantage of it. We won't be staying here long if I can avoid it."

She wasn't talking to Moon. He went to the bench he had picked out, and lay down on it with his pack under his head and his back to the others. He tried to ignore their quiet talk as they ate, then explored the bathing room and settled for the night. The blankets were soft and smelled of fresh greenery, as if they had been recently aired.

It was a long way here from Indigo Cloud, and there were so many ways for even a queen as used to travel as Jade to get hurt, to get killed. And Jade didn't know the Reaches anywhere near as well as Tempest, she wouldn't know where the small obscure courts like Viridian Sea were, wouldn't know where to go for help and shelter. If she had ever left Indigo Cloud at all.

Torn between despair and fear, if Moon slept at all, it was by accident. He heard every sound the warriors made, every breath, every faint noise from the corridor. At one point he came out of a light doze convinced that someone—something—was out in the passage, standing still and listening. Moon didn't move, barely breathed, for a long time, stretching every sense. Finally he turned his head toward the doorway, but nothing stood there and no shadow fell across the floor. After a while he heard what might have been a footfall, and gradually the sensation of being watched faded.

It was a relief when he finally felt the sun lift into dawn. He got up and took advantage of the bathing room while Tempest and the warriors were still stirring. It was big enough for three or four times their number, with small pools fed by streams of water channeled down the stone walls, drapes of vines and the pillar-size roots winding between them. Moon picked a pool that had warming stones in it and took his first real bath since they had left Viridian Sea, using a soap that smelled faintly of unfamiliar flowers. He changed into the spare clothes he had brought, which had managed to stay mostly dry in his pack, and washed the others.

When he went back to the main room, the Arbora who had come to the door with Rise had returned, bringing tea and plates of fruit and flatbread. They didn't stare at Moon the way they had last night, but he caught a few sideways looks from the younger ones.

"Is the daughter queen returned yet?" Beacon asked the older female, who was putting a kettle onto the warming stones of the hearth.

"She should be back sometime today," the Arbora said, getting to her feet. "We thought she would come last night, but she must have decided not to fly in the storm." She threw a quick opaque glance at Moon. "I know she would want to be here."

“Did any visitors come last night, after we arrived?” The question was out before Moon realized he was going to ask it.

The Arbora blinked, surprised, but said readily, “No, no one’s come except you.”

Moon looked away. He hadn’t really expected a different answer.

Tempest sat on one of the benches, her tail folded neatly around her feet, watching them. She had slept in her Arbora form, but had put on her winged form again for the visitors. She said, “I want to see one of the queens, it doesn’t matter which.”

Her tone had an edge to it, and the Arbora woman looked up, startled. The younger Arbora, waiting beside the door, twitched uneasily, the silk of their robes whispering. Beacon folded her arms and seemed unmoved, but the other warriors radiated discomfort.

Tempest was treading a fine line, risking rudeness to the Arbora and an insult to Opal Night. She kept her spines down, but didn’t soften her voice. She said, “We have long days of travel to return to our court, and I’m anxious to discharge this burden. Will you take that message to your queen, whichever one is most concerned?”

This burden, Moon thought, his mouth twisting sardonically. He tried not to feel rejected by the comment. It wasn’t as if he was fond of Tempest.

The Arbora got to her feet. Moon judged her age as well into maturity, but not near the point where the dark bronze sheen of her skin would begin to gray. Her dark hair was straight and her face round, her features pleasant. She looked Tempest right in the eye and said, “My name is Russet, teacher of Opal Night. I’ll tell our queen what you’ve said, and how you speak of the consort you’re supposedly protecting.”

Moon blinked, caught off guard. Even Tempest looked more surprised than offended.

Arbora had a higher status within the court than warriors, but seeing one actually confront a queen was rare.

Beacon and the other warriors looked equally taken aback. Tempest said, slowly, incredulously, as if she couldn’t believe she was having this conversation, “I meant no disrespect toward the consort.”

Russet’s eyes narrowed. Obviously unconvinced, she inclined her head stiffly to Tempest and walked out, the younger Arbora in the doorway scattering before her.

Tempest sighed, and lowered her brows to give Moon a look that

suggested that this was clearly his fault. Moon hissed at her and headed for the back of the main chamber. As he passed Dart, he heard the warrior mutter to Gust, “They’re not going to invite us to eat with them, are they?”

Moon went to stand in front of the opening into the central well. The huge space was lit from high above, the shafts of morning light making the green drapes of vine darker and glinting off the mist from the waterfall. He could see garden terraces a few hundred paces below this level, all heavily planted with bushes, small trees, vines, berry brambles, and the green leafy plants that usually meant belowground root vegetables. The reservoir that caught the waterfall runoff was lined with flat gray stones. Several Arbora walked along it, some of them pausing to pull up basket traps that might be for fish or crustaceans.

Russet’s reaction had confused him. But then Russet was just one Arbora, doing what Arbora did best and reminding the Aeriats to follow their own rules.

Vines rustled as Tempest moved up behind him. Moon felt the back of his neck itch with her proximity, but he didn’t shift. She said, “If they don’t send someone to greet me before the sun reaches noon, we’re leaving.”

Moon’s breath caught in his throat. He hadn’t considered this, that Opal Night’s failure to greet Tempest might negate the whole arrangement. If Tempest took him back to Indigo Cloud, they couldn’t refuse to accept him, could they? If they weren’t all dead, if Jade hadn’t run into disaster on her way here. He said, carefully keeping his voice neutral, “We?”

“Not you,” she said, her voice dry. “If Indigo Cloud refuses to take you back, I’m not getting stuck with you.”

Moon’s whole body went tight, as if somebody had punched him in the heart. Jade’s not coming. Tempest knows she’s not coming.

He flung himself away from the wall, shoved past Tempest, and slammed across the room to the bench where he had left his pack. He didn’t realize he had shifted until he reached for the worn leather and saw the black scales and fully extended claws.

He started for the door and Tempest came from overhead, bounced off a root pillar and landed in front of him. She demanded, “What are you doing?”

“I’m leaving.” You would think it was obvious.

“What? You can’t—” She hissed in disbelief, then said, “Moon,

that was a joke.”

Moon lashed his tail, frustrated, furious. It struck him then, the difference between what she had said and what he had somehow heard. But he was too angry for that to make much of a difference. “Get out of my way.”

She growled in exasperation. “You can’t go back to Indigo Cloud! They can’t take you in unless Opal Night formally gives you up—”

“I know that!” He meant to say the words but they came out as a snarl of rage so loud the watching warriors flinched. He hissed in a breath, and forced his voice down to the normal range. “Get out of my way.”

Behind him, stupid Dart said, “He wouldn’t really go solitary—”

“He is a solitary, idiot,” Streak told him. “That’s why this queen doesn’t want him.”

Beacon hissed at them. “Shut up.”

Tempest watched him intently. She knew he was serious now. She thought he was crazy, but she knew he meant every word. She said, “You know I have to stop you.”

Moon could feel her trying to force him to shift to groundling, but that was much harder to do when he was already in this form. Pearl hadn’t been able to make him shift, and Tempest wasn’t nearly so strong. He showed his front row of fangs. “So stop me.”

She grimaced in disbelief. “You won’t fight a queen.”

There was an idea. Fighting to the death with Tempest would solve all his problems. He sneered, “That’s what your dead sister thought.”

Tempest hit him in pure reflex, a backhanded blow that rocked Moon back even though he had been prepared for it. He didn’t give her a chance to think twice. He dropped to grab the kettle from the hearth and flung it into her face. She ducked, the ceramic shattered against the stone doorframe, and she charged him. He fell back, used her own momentum to flip her over his head. She tumbled but rolled to her feet, braced to lunge at him.

The ear-shattering roar from the corridor startled Tempest into bouncing backward and sent Moon leaping up to sink his claws into the wall. The scattered warriors all shifted to groundling and huddled in place.

The consort who stepped into the room was in his winged form, a full head taller than Moon and broader in the shoulders and chest. His

spines were flared, his wings partially extended to brush both sides of the wide doorway.

In a level voice that still managed to convey boiling rage, he said, "What is this?"

Uh oh, Moon thought, still breathing hard from the aborted fight.

Moving slowly and carefully, Tempest straightened up and dropped her spines. "It was a misunderstanding." The consort regarded her for what felt like far too many heartbeats. It seemed evident that he considered that explanation inadequate. Moon wasn't sure how bad it was for a visiting queen to be caught fighting a consort, especially a consort who didn't belong to her. From everyone's reaction, he was guessing it was fairly serious. Tempest added, belatedly, "I thank you for your intervention."

The consort didn't react, not with so much as a flick of a spine. After a very long, silent moment, he cocked his head toward Moon. "Get down from there."

Moon thought about it, but decided he didn't have much of a choice. After this, Tempest was unlikely to let him provoke her enough to kill him. He dropped to the floor.

He landed two paces away from the consort, who stared down at him. The room was so silent it didn't sound as if anyone was breathing. Moon realized what the consort was waiting for, and thought, Why not? He had no reason to protect himself and being knocked unconscious would be a relief. He shifted to groundling.

The blood pounding in his temples was suddenly louder, and the room swayed. Moon took a deep breath and stayed on his feet. The cheekbone where Tempest's first blow had landed was numb and he could feel the skin around his eye swelling. Tempest made a sound, a faint intake of breath; possibly she hadn't realized how hard she had hit him.

The consort twitched a spine, the only hint of agitation he had shown so far. His gaze moved over Moon from head to toe. Betraying nothing, he said, "Get your things."

Well, you got your wish, Moon thought sourly, and looked around for his pack. He was getting thrown out. Leaning over to pick up the fallen pack made him feel less faint but more nauseous. He stumbled a little as he straightened up.

The consort still stared at him. "That's all you brought?" He turned to Tempest.

Moon didn't understand what he meant, but she did. She said,

stiffly, “He was given the opportunity to bring his belongings. We didn’t—”

“This is all I had to bring,” Moon interrupted. “I came there with nothing. Everything I had were gifts because I was the consort. I’m not their consort anymore.” Sanity was returning like a wash of freezing water. It occurred to him that he had been doing that thing again, pretending not to feel, or pretending the feelings were about something else. Except that he seemed to have lost the knack for it, and instead of remaining safely buried it had all exploded out. He didn’t want to be dead, and he hadn’t wanted Tempest to kill him. But in that moment he had been willing to do anything to stop feeling, to change what was happening, fleeing the colony and becoming a solitary, fighting to the death with a queen, anything. He added, “It wasn’t Tempest’s fault. I made her fight me.”

“No, I—” Tempest began, then stopped, her spines flicking in agitation. Moon realized he had given her an out, that if he took responsibility for the fight, then Opal Night couldn’t blame Emerald Twilight.

The consort hissed, grabbed Moon’s wrist and pulled him out of the room. Out in the passage, several Arbora and warriors waited, listening intently, frozen in consternation. As the consort appeared, they hurriedly cleared a path, some of them climbing right up the walls. The only one Moon recognized was Russet. As they passed her, the consort snapped, “Send for Lithe.”

The consort took the first turn up a ramp that wound deeper into the tree. Moon had assumed he was being thrown out of the court, but this wasn’t the way to the colony’s main entrance. He planted his feet and wrenched his wrist out of the consort’s grip, scales rasping against his groundling skin. The consort turned back, spines lifting. Moon said, “Where are we going?”

The consort lashed his tail impatiently. “To the consorts’ bowers.” He tilted his head. “Did you want to stay with them?”

“No.”

“Then come on.”

The consort took more turns, finally passing through a doorway onto a bridge that crossed one small curve of the central well. It was almost under the spray of the waterfall, and a cool damp updraft ruffled Moon’s hair. The bridge went under a heavy arbor of vines and through the inner wall of the tree, back into a passage heavily carved with figures of Aeriats and Arbora.

The passage ended in a big round room, all carved wood, with a beaten metal hearth bowl in the center. There were low benches here too, curved ones, covered with gray furs and cushions in dark fabrics. The consort pushed Moon down on the nearest. "Sit there."

Moon sat. His head was starting to clear; the brisk walk and the cool mist from the waterfall had helped.

The consort paced away, spines flicking and his tail lashing impatiently, then he shifted to groundling. He was bigger than Moon in this form too, with a heavier build than Aeriath usually had. His skin was a lighter gold-bronze, and he had red-brown hair. His face was more square and blunt than Moon's, or any other consort he had seen before. He was still handsome, but he looked like he was built for fighting rather than breeding. He was dressed in dark brown and leather, a shirt that left his arms bare to show off chased gold armbands. His expression was serious, not angry. Moon asked, "So you aren't throwing me out of the colony?"

"What?" The consort glanced at him as if that was the craziest thing he had heard yet. "Of course not."

A young Arbora in groundling form rushed in, stumbled to a halt as she saw them. She had dark copper skin and dark hair cut into a fluffy halo around her face, and a slim strong build under the faded blue shirt and pants she wore. She had a satchel slung over one shoulder and from the dirt smudges, looked like she had been called in from gardening.

Brow furrowed with concern, she looked from Moon to the consort. "Yes?"

"Take care of him," the consort said, and walked out.

Moon stared after him. He called out, "If I ask nicely, can I be thrown out of the colony?"

The Arbora stepped closer, peering at Moon. "Russet said the foreign queen hit you in the face, but I didn't believe her. I see I was wrong."

The side of Moon's face was still numb but he could feel the skin tightening with incipient swelling. "Who are you? Who was he?"

"Oh, I'm Lithe, a mentor. He was Umber, the consort of Onyx, the sister queen." Lithe slipped the satchel off her shoulder and knelt. She sorted through it and dumped out some cloth packets of herbs. Her sleeves were rolled up, revealing muscular forearms and an array of bracelets, beads, and bright metal and polished stones. Ducking her head so her hair shielded her face, she added, "Ah...it was also

suggested that I ask you if you had been...mistreated?"

"Not lately." Looking past her, Moon saw they had an audience. Other Arbora gathered in the doorway from the passage, and more in a smaller doorway across the room. They were all dressed for outdoor work and carried a strong scent of loam. Realizing Moon was watching them, they retreated with some confusion, but from the rustling and whispers coming from the passage, they hadn't gone far.

Lithe looked up at him and smiled uncertainly, clearly not sure how to take his answer. "That's...good." She got up to reach for a kettle. "How long were you with Indigo Cloud? Emerald Twilight told us a story about you being alone—"

"I was alone, until six months ago when Indigo Cloud's line-grandfather found me," Moon said. He had a question of his own. "Why did Opal Night abandon me, a female warrior, and four baby Arbora to die in the forests of the Abascene peninsula?"

"What?" Lithe almost dropped the kettle. There was a chorus of shocked gasps from the passage.

After a long moment, Lithe said, "What happened to the others?"

"They were eaten by Tath," Moon said, not bothering to soften it, not saying "they died" or "they were killed" or any of the other words that were easier to hear but less true.

Silence stretched. Lithe set the kettle on the warming stones and looked down at it, biting her lip. "I don't know what happened. I was born after the attack." She cleared her throat. "Who were they? The Arbora, the warrior?"

"Leaf, Light, Bliss, and Fern. The warrior was called Sorrow."

The Arbora just outside the room whispered to each other. Nobody seemed to have an answer. This was about what Moon had expected. And he didn't see much point in staying here any longer. He pushed to his feet. "I'm leaving." He could at least retrace the route between here and Indigo Cloud, looking for signs of Jade and the others.

Lithe glanced up, startled. "You can't leave! The daughter queen wants to see you. She's your clutchmate."

"Clutchmate?" Moon repeated. For a moment the word didn't make sense. "They said...Rise said I was the only survivor of the queen's last clutch."

"The only consort," Lithe explained. "It was a mixed royal clutch, three consorts and two queens. One of the queens survived." She

hesitated. "Her name is Celadon. Your birthqueen is called Malachite."

Moon shook his head, telling himself it didn't change anything.

Lithe took that for confusion, and explained, "Malachite is the reigning queen. Onyx is the sister queen, but she's descended from the bloodline that remained here when the court split up and half of it went to the east, generations ago." Lithe handed Moon a cloth pad filled with herbs. Automatically he pressed it against his eye and felt the swelling start to ease immediately. Mentors augmented their healing simples with magic; the more powerful the mentor, the quicker the healing. Lithe must be very strong. "When the eastern branch of the court returned, forty turns or so ago, Malachite led them back here." Lithe hesitated. "The consort who fathered you was killed by the Fell. They attacked the eastern colony and destroyed it."

Moon took a deep breath, the scent of the sweet herbs tingling in his throat. "I knew it was the Fell."

"Do you remember it?" Lithe asked, taking a seat on the fur mat near the hearth. The other Arbora had crept back into the doorways.

"No." Sometimes Moon had thought there might be a buried memory, but he wasn't sure if it was really there or just a construction of his imagination, made up of images of other places he had seen the Fell destroy. "I just...thought it was likely."

"Before Indigo Cloud, you were really alone all that time? You were living as a solitary?"

"Yes." Moon looked up, baring his teeth. "I didn't know what a solitary was, I hadn't seen another Raksura since the others were killed, I didn't even know we were called Raksura—"

Lithe waved her hands. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it! We just—We weren't sure how much of what Emerald Twilight told us was true. They said the queen of Indigo Cloud took you without knowing your bloodline because there were no other consorts in the court, and none from other courts who would consent."

Moon wished yet again that Emerald Twilight had kept its mouth shut. "The sister queen," he corrected. "The Arbora didn't want to move the court back to the Reaches without a consort. Then the colony was attacked by Fell, and...then it didn't matter."

Lithe was watching him with a troubled expression. "Indigo Cloud took advantage of you."

"Yes, but—" Moon had always seen it as the other way around, that he had been the one with the potential to take advantage of Indigo Cloud. He had always been aware of that and had tried not to,

especially after realizing just how badly he wanted to stay. And it was none of Opal Night's business. Did they really think they had taken him away from Indigo Cloud for his own good? It was tempting to believe it. But Emerald Twilight didn't think so. And Zephyr hadn't understood the reasoning behind it either, and she was from a court uninvolved in the situation and presumably with nothing to lose by expressing an honest opinion. "I wanted to stay." Moon tossed the herb packet into the pile near Lithe's satchel. "When Opal Night asked for me, you gave them an excuse to get rid of me."

There were surprised murmurs from the Arbora in the doorway. Lithe seemed baffled. "But if all they needed was an excuse to get rid of you, why did you want to stay?"

Because it was my place! I never had a place before. It didn't matter how I got it, it was mine. Moon didn't want to say that to these people. "Why did Malachite bring me here? What does she want from me?"

"You belong here," Lithe said it like it was obvious. "When you talk to Malachite—"

"She had a chance to talk to me last night."

Flustered, Lithe actually glanced at their Arbora audience for support, but they all precipitously retreated into the passage. So everyone knew that Malachite had seen him and changed her mind. He thought Lithe would say something about it, but she just said, "I'm sorry. I'll take you up to a bower to rest."

Moon wasn't tired, but he knew sitting here wasn't going to get him any answers. Not the kind of answers he wanted, anyway.

The consort's bowers were above this central room, reached by twisty, narrow stairs that curved up through the tree's inner walls. As Lithe led him upward, Moon said, "Where are the other consorts?"

"Most of them live in the other set of bowers, for Onyx's bloodline. These are for the consorts of your bloodline."

These rooms all felt empty. "So where are they?"

Lithe was a bad liar. She could have said that they were out flying or playing with the fledglings. Instead she said, "Ah...With Celadon." Forestalling his next question, she added, "She'll have to tell you herself."

She turned and took the last few steps up into a bower that had been hastily prepared; a young male Arbora was still there, dumping a bucket of heating stones into the metal hearth. The room was round, the walls carved with flowers and trees, stretching up to a domed roof

set with polished blue stones. A curved bed big enough for several people hung about ten paces up one wall, and across from it a wall section was carved out, forming a small balcony with an opening that from the angle must look out on the central well.

“Do you need anything?” Lithe asked him.

I need to not be here, Moon thought. He dropped his pack on the floor. “Like what?”

Lithe hesitated. “Food...clothes?”

“No.” If she wasn’t going to answer his questions, what he mostly wanted was for her to leave.

As if that thought was evident, Lithe’s brow furrowed and she said, “It’ll be all right. You’ll see. We’re glad to have you here.”

Moon didn’t try to look as if he felt anything other than skeptical and bitter. Lithe gave in and left with the other Arbora.

Chapter Seven

Moon waited until the sound of their steps had faded, then explored the bower. Toward the back was a doorway that led to a private bathing room, with a curved hot pool that could be filled from a channel in the wall. With no sign of a previous occupant, the rooms felt as if they had been unused for a long time. He went out to the passage and listened for a moment. He could still hear the faint sounds of conversation and movement from the Arbora, but they all seemed to be down in the consorts' hall.

Moving quietly, he made a quick survey of the other bowers off these upper passages. He had been given one of the larger rooms, but none of the others were shabby. At first they all seemed unused, with no scent of recent occupation. The hearths were bare, the bedding and furs rolled up and stacked against the walls.

Until he got to the far end of the warren.

There, he found a group of large bowers which all showed signs of occupation. The hearths had warming stones recently renewed by a mentor, and furs, cushions, and baskets of belongings still lay on the floor. In one, a book had been left behind, its tooled leather cover loosely wrapped around the scroll of paper, lying forgotten on a cushion. The occupants had been gone just long enough for the scent to start to fade. Moon put his face down in the bedding, but all he could get was traces of Raksura. They had been gone at least a day.

Or a night. They left last night, because that's when Rise invited you to leave the guest rooms. The court had meant for him to stay here in these bowers, but hadn't wanted the other consorts of his bloodline nearby. Because they didn't trust him? Because they didn't want the other consorts contaminated by association? Because the other consorts were afraid of the crazy solitary?

The one thing Moon did manage to determine was that there was no other passage exit. To leave this area, he had to go out through the consorts' hall, where the Arbora were still gathered.

He returned to his bower, and shifted to jump up to the balcony in the wall.

It was furnished as a seating area, with thick woven mats padding

the wood and pillows to lean on. The opening looked out at the side of the waterfall, protected from the spray by a heavy trellis of vines, the green leaves veined with purple. The updraft filled the room with fresh cool air, scented of water and damp earth; it would be a good place to sleep. If Moon ever managed to sleep again.

Moon pulled in his disemboweling claws and sat on his heels, looking out on the view. The vines and the angle to the waterfall hid most of the central well; he could see some of the garden terraces and the edge of the reservoir below. The Arbora who had been fishing there had moved on.

His biggest problem, of course, was not the reason he had been brought to this strange court. His biggest problem was that he wasn't thinking clearly, and the uncertainty about Jade and Indigo Cloud had driven him right out of his mind. He hadn't been thinking clearly since Tempest and Zephyr had arrived at Indigo Cloud. At least you know that now. But knowing what was wrong with him didn't cure it.

Even now, nervous energy made his skin itch. He could just leap out the window into the central well, but he wanted to see what would happen if he tried to walk out. He jumped down from the alcove and went down the stairs to the consorts' hall.

He found it still occupied by several Arbora, who all looked up, startled at his sudden appearance. A few were sewing or making braided cords, and one had a book open on her lap, but this couldn't be the place where they normally gathered. Russet, the Arbora who had challenged Tempest, sat near the hearth.

Moon ignored them and circled around to head toward the doorway.

Two actually jumped to their feet, and Russet said hurriedly, "Where are you going? I mean, is there something you need? We can get it for you."

Moon stopped and looked around the room, making it deliberate. Several Arbora avoided meeting his eyes. "Am I a prisoner?"

It was unfair, since they had given him a bower with a window, but they were either too disconcerted to think of that reply or too polite to say it aloud. Some shook their heads, others murmured demurs, and Russet said, "No, of course not!"

Moon walked out, thinking for an instant they would just let him go. Then half of them, including Russet, got up and followed him.

Inwardly seething, Moon started to turn toward the inward-leading corridor.

Russet offered, "There's a passage out to the floor of the central well. Would you like to see it?"

At least they weren't trying to insist he stay cooped up. He nodded, and a relieved Russet led the way.

The passage took them to a downward ramp and eventually opened to an archway into the huge space of the well.

Moon walked out onto a broad platform carpeted with thick grasses and tiny purple and blue flowers. Sunlight shafted down from splits in the trunk high overhead, caught as sparkles in the spray from the waterfall. To one side, tall stone-lined steps led up to the rim of the reservoir. Moon went that way and climbed up to walk along the rim. The Arbora didn't follow, but settled down on the grass platform and resumed their tasks.

The water was clear enough to show that the pool was stocked with shellfish, little green crabs, and big snails. Delicate, glittery insects buzzed around stands of reed, and a viny water plant with big red globes floated just below the surface.

Moon followed the rim around the pool, the smooth stone cool under his feet. There were larger rocks placed around the edge, for sitting and landing, scarred by turns and turns of claws. On the far side he had a good view of the lower part of the hall, which had broader terraces with more gardens. Several Arbora moved along them, weeding or checking on the progress of their plantings. On the platform not far below the lake were fern trees with long broad fronds, the kind that grew nuts that could be ground up to make a spice.

There were people down there too, but not Arbora. They were tall, slim, dressed in dark colors. Seven warriors, all male, sitting or standing at the base of a tree, talking. Watching them, Moon saw the glitter of bright metal. Some of them were wearing bracelets, one a flat pectoral necklace, another had the glint of gold studs around his ears. Warriors didn't often wear jewelry like that, not when they weren't dressed up for a special occasion. Those are consorts.

Moon knew just enough to realize it would be rude to shift and dive down there like he was stooping on prey. He took the nearest path off the reservoir's rim, a set of artfully placed stones leading down. He made it to a curving garden platform just above the trees, only six paces or so above the lower terrace, an easy jump down even in his groundling form.

He had just reached the grassy edge of the terrace when one of the consorts spotted him and alerted the others with a warning hiss.

Moon stopped, close enough to see they were all his age or younger. Most matched Umber's heavier build, red-brown hair, and lighter gold coloring, but three had dark hair and dark bronze skin, and were lean and lanky and sharp-featured. Seeing them all together like this, Moon suddenly understood how other Raksura could tell he wasn't from one of Indigo Cloud's bloodlines, could see the faint differences in coloring and build and feature, how a queen like Ice of Emerald Twilight might be able to add up all these slight factors to identify his bloodline.

They all stared back at him, blankly startled, and no one said anything. Deciding it was up to him, Moon took a breath to speak.

Almost as one, they all shifted, the sudden whoosh of displaced air enough to make him stumble backward. Leaping into the air, they were away in moments, and flew down the length of the well toward a broad balcony in the upper side of the trunk.

Moon stood there, stunned. Sick hurt settled over him like a blanket.

He looked up to see it had happened in full view of the Arbora working on the garden terraces above. Now they were all industriously hunched over, studying random plants or their baskets or the ground, whatever was handy, with an embarrassed air that clearly said they had seen everything.

He turned away, climbed slowly back up to the reservoir's edge, and sat down on one of the stones around the rim. He wasn't even sure why it hurt so much; it certainly wasn't the first time he had been rejected by Raksura at first sight. It wasn't even the first time he had been rejected at first sight in this colony. But they're related to you, and they have to know it. They had to know the story, too, and that he had never been a solitary by choice.

He sat there a while, watching the stick insects skate across the water, when he heard someone leap up the steps at the far end of the rim.

He looked up to see a green Arbora just climbing onto the stones around the reservoir's edge. She saw him and shifted to her groundling form. She was about Russet's age, and like her she had dark bronze skin, but her hair was brown and curly, tied back with a beaded scarf. She was wearing a light blue dress, the sleeves rolled up and the hem knotted so it didn't hang past her knees. She bolted toward him, her feet slapping the stone paving.

Moon stood, baffled, as she stumbled to a halt a few paces away. She said, "I just heard—They said you were with two Arbora children who were killed by Tath—Leaf and Fern?"

“Oh.” Moon felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. “Leaf had yellow-brown scales, Fern was dark green...”

“That’s them.” She took a sharp breath. “They were from my last clutch.”

They stared at one another a moment. Moon’s throat had gone dry. The Arbora distractedly pushed her curls back. “Who were the other two? I didn’t—”

“Bliss and Light.”

She nodded. “Their mother was Fair. She didn’t make it out of the colony. Neither did Yarrow. He was Fern and Leaf’s sire. That was our first clutch together. I don’t know about Bliss and Light’s sire, I’ll have to ask around. Not many of the soldiers and hunters made it out.” She blinked, and sat down suddenly on the paving.

Moon stood for a moment, unable to think of anything to say. All the words seemed to stick in his throat. Moving tentatively, he sat down beside her. She smelled of sweet herbs, and of fledglings and babies; she must be a teacher. He hoped she didn’t want him to go. Here was a living tie to his real family. “What’s your name?”

She rubbed her face, as if trying to push away the memories. “Sorry, I’m Feather.” She patted his knee absently. “I took care of you in the nurseries, when you were small enough to tuck under my arm.” As Moon was mentally reeling from that, she added, “They said there was a warrior with you? I didn’t recognize the name.”

“Sorrow. Her scales were dark copper. Her groundling form...She looked like me, same skin and hair. Except her eyes were brown.” He knew he wasn’t being very coherent, but it was the best he could manage.

“She must have changed her name.” Feather frowned and bit her lip in thought. “It sounds like she was from Malachite’s dominant bloodline, though. That should narrow it down a little. I’ll ask and see what the others who are my age remember. I suppose...” Her voice went thick. “She just grabbed as many children as she could?”

“Two in each arm. I was hanging on to her neck,” Moon told her. Then he went still, realizing what he had said. I don’t remember that. Except he did, the rush of air in his spines, clinging to a warm scaly body, Arbora babies too terrified to cry, and somewhere close by voices screaming in rage, agony...He squeezed his eyes shut, banishing the image. “What happened?”

“It was the Fell. Back then, they weren’t as bad in the east. There were a few small flights that we knew of, preying on isolated

groundling towns or camps. They never hit big cities, like I've heard they've done now." Feather's gaze was on the gardens, and the Arbora moving along the plantings. "We never could figure out how they got so close." She shrugged a little, her expression turning bitter. "None of us had ever seen or scented Fell before, so the rulers must have been able to confuse the soldiers who were guarding the ground entrances just long enough to get inside. The next thing we knew, there were dakti swarming the passages and major kethel digging in through the top."

Moon hesitated, watching her. "You didn't look for survivors, afterward?" He braced himself not to react to her answer, whatever it was.

He still wasn't prepared for it when she said, "We looked, but we didn't think there were other survivors. The queen and the warriors went after the prisoners the Fell took."

"Prisoners?"

"They took Malachite's consort, Dusk. Your father. Some Arbora and Arbora children." Feather turned to him and squeezed his wrist. "Malachite thought you were with them. I thought that's where my clutch was. The Kethel brought down one of the bluffs, and it collapsed into the colony. We didn't know who was a prisoner and who was buried under the rubble. The only one we were sure of was Dusk, because some of us saw the Fell take him." She made a helpless gesture. "But the hunters and some of the warriors searched the forest around the colony, looking for anyone who might be separated, hurt. They should have found you."

Moon pulled away, shaking his head, confused down to the core. "But when I wasn't with the prisoners, and there were others missing —"

"It took Malachite well over a turn to find them and free them," Feather said.

Moon stared. "They were trapped with the Fell for a turn?" It was too horrifying to take in.

"I was with the Arbora survivors. There were maybe a hundred of us, and the wounded warriors, what was left of the children and fledglings. We were hidden in the forest near the colony. Malachite, the warriors who were still able to fight, and a couple of young mentors went after the Fell. Three nights later, Malachite came back alone and told us to follow the coast back to the west, back here to the mother colony, that she and the others would catch up with us when they could."

The enormity of that was hard to imagine. “That’s a long way to walk.”

“We thought so,” Feather admitted. “But we started out. Slowly at first, with all the wounded, but we made better progress once the warriors recovered and could carry us for short distances. We got messages from Malachite along the way. She would send warriors to check on us, make sure we were still well and that she could find us when she needed to. She wouldn’t let the warriors who had healed up join her, made them stay with us. Then in the rainy season, months and months later, she came with the others. She brought all the prisoners back, except your father. He was dead, along with twelve of the warriors.” Her expression held remembered anguish. “We didn’t know how many prisoners the Fell had. We’d convinced ourselves that most of the court had survived. Seeing how few there were...” She shook herself, shaking off the memory, the beads in her hair clicking. She looked up at him, bewildered. “I don’t understand how we missed you. You were alone all that time?”

“Until this turn. Stone, the line-grandfather from Indigo Cloud, found me.”

Feather hissed, a combination of frustration and regret. “I wonder...Do you remember how long the warrior fled with you? If the Fell were chasing her—She must have gone some distance from the colony, or we would have stumbled on her.”

“I don’t remember. The Fell could have followed her because she was carrying us, because they wanted children.” After Indigo Cloud’s experience with the Fell flight who had been determined to crossbreed Raksura, it was a real possibility. “What did the Fell do to the prisoners? Did they try to make them breed with the progenitor and the rulers?”

Feather sat back, eyes widening in astonishment and consternation. He thought he had shocked her, until she said, “How did you know about that?”

So that’s a ‘yes,’ Moon thought. “It almost happened to Indigo Cloud, before the colony moved to the Reaches. It was a Fell flight that had bred with Raksura before, and wanted more of us. They had a few dakti with mentor powers, and a female ruler who was part Raksuran queen.” Even as he said it, a horrible realization struck, that Ranea and the mentor-dakti might have been born from the Opal Night prisoners. “It wasn’t—That couldn’t have been the same flight that attacked—”

“What? Oh no, no.” Feather shook her head emphatically.

“Malachite killed their progenitor, and— There were none of our people left with them. The warriors told me there wasn’t much left of the flight at all.”

Moon subsided, relieved. Now that he thought about it, the timing didn’t match what Ranea had told him about her flight’s multiple attempts to crossbreed Raksura. And she was part queen. She would have recognized my bloodline. She surely wouldn’t have missed the chance to gloat over it. He said, “Opal Night should already know what happened to Indigo Cloud. The word’s been spreading through Emerald Twilight to the other courts.”

“If Malachite and Onyx know, they didn’t tell us.” Feather still seemed distracted. “Not yet, anyway.”

Watching her, Moon felt like he had the end of a tangled mass of threads, and if he pulled in the right spot, the whole thing would come apart. If he just knew what the right spot was. “Does that have something to do with why Malachite had me brought here?”

“No, how could it?” Feather looked up, frowning. “Wait, Moon, didn’t you want to come?”

Moon didn’t want to go through the story again, but he had to give her an answer. “I was taken by the sister queen of Indigo Cloud. I wanted to stay.”

Feather, at least, didn’t try to argue with him. Her brow furrowed in sympathy. “I suppose they had no choice but to let you go.”

“She said she’d come after me, but she should have been here by now. I think ...” Moon stopped, realizing he had come within a hair’s breadth of confessing the fear that he was infertile. Don’t be stupid. Feather might be sympathetic, but she wouldn’t keep that information from the Opal Night royals. “I’m not counting on it.”

Feather watched him worriedly. “Why not?”

Moon shook his head, wishing he hadn’t spoken. Then he sensed motion in the air above them and looked up.

A green warrior spiraled down from the upper levels of the hall. The slow fall indicated that the approach wasn’t hostile, but Moon pushed to his feet anyway.

Feather stood as well, murmuring, “That’s Rise.”

Moon’s thought was She’s here to tell me Jade’s arrived. He cursed himself for the surge of hope even as his heart started to beat faster.

Rise pulled her wings in to land neatly a polite distance down the

reservoir's rim. She shifted to her groundling form and came toward them. She nodded to Feather, then said to Moon, "The sister queen Onyx has asked that you be present at a meal this evening, with her and her consort, and some members of the court."

Moon looked down, trying to hide the disappointment. Stop that, he told himself. Stop thinking about it.

"Onyx?" Feather said, not seeming pleased by this at all.

"Onyx," Rise confirmed, unbending just enough to sound disgruntled.

Onyx was from the bloodline who had stayed in the Reaches. Still a relation, but presumably a distant one. Moon said, "Will Tempest be there?"

"She left, earlier this morning." Rise looked uncomfortable.

That's no surprise, Moon thought. As promised, Tempest had abandoned him as soon as possible. He looked from Rise to Feather, whose expression was now mutinous. There was definitely an undercurrent here that had nothing to do with Emerald Twilight's abrupt departure. "I take it this dinner isn't a good thing."

Feather hissed out a breath. "Onyx and Malachite don't exactly agree on a number of things. You would think the court would be better for two such strong queens, but not when they're pulling in such different directions."

"What directions?" Moon asked.

Rise cleared her throat significantly, glaring at Feather. Feather scratched her head, wincing. "Uh...Malachite will have to tell you about that." It was clearly her turn to be evasive. "Really. She'd have my head if she found out I'd said anything to you."

Rise offered suddenly, "You don't have to go. You could say you don't feel well, that you want to stay in your bower."

It was probably a well-meant suggestion, but this was the first time one of the royals here had actually offered to speak to Moon, and it was an opportunity to find out more about what was actually going on. "No, I'll go."

Feather muttered a curse. With a note of warning, Rise said, "They won't be kind to you."

Moon snorted. The way the other consorts had reacted to him made that plain enough. "It won't be the first time." Both Rise and Feather looked puzzled, and he explained, "Raksura don't like solitaires, and they especially don't like consorts who are solitaires."

Rise, being a warrior and speaking for queens, understood first, and her face went hard. Feather said, bewildered, “But you weren’t a solitary. You were lost.”

“But I couldn’t prove it.” He felt obscurely guilty, watching Feather’s face fall as understanding set in.

Rise inclined her head. “I’ll come to your bower when it’s time for the dinner.” She hesitated, as if she wanted to add something, then moved away. She shifted and took to the air, and hard flaps carried her up toward the higher levels of the hall.

Feather let out her breath. “I should go too. I need to get back to the nurseries or Luster will have a fit.” She stepped close and hugged him tightly. Like all Arbora, her groundling form felt like a soft cushion over rock hard muscle. She said, “Be careful. And try not to worry. Celadon will be back soon, and Malachite...This is hard for her. Just try to be patient.”

It was good advice and well-meant, even if he couldn’t take it. Moon hugged her back, and watched her walk away down the path along the reservoir.



After Feather had gone, Moon wandered around the reservoir to give himself time to think.

The Fell could have pursued Sorrow, driving her far from the colony, well outside the range that the Arbora had searched for survivors. He wondered if she had ever tried to return, to scout the colony to look for others, or if she had been unable to leave him and the other children for that long, and afraid to take them with her. In her position, Moon might have taken the chance. But that was easy for him to say, not being a desperate, traumatized, and possibly wounded warrior, responsible for four babies and a fledgling, hiding from the Fell in a forest filled with predators.

There was no way to know, now. He didn’t even know what Sorrow had been planning to do in the future. She might have been waiting until he and the others were old enough to travel, to start her own long journey back to the west.

It was strange to have so many questions answered, when there was still so much he didn’t know.

When he went back to his bower, he found someone had left tea warming on the hearth, and brought the clothes he had left drying in the guest bathing room. They were cleaner than the ones he was wearing now, and maybe a little less shabby. On his way here, he had

passed his Arbora escort, and Russet had repeated Lithe's offer to loan him clothes, obviously with the upcoming dinner in mind. Moon had turned her down; the Arbora meant well, but he didn't want Opal Night's gifts. Umber had seen him, and even commented on the scarcity of his belongings, so Onyx and her coterie would know; borrowing something finer would just make him look as if he cared about their opinion.

He drank the tea, then used the bathing room attached to the consort's bowers, not wanting to give anyone any scope for remarks about dirty solitaires, and changed into his slightly less shabby clothes. Sitting by the hearth and waiting for Rise, he had time to realize the excuse she had suggested for not accepting the invitation might not be stretching the truth too much. He felt light-headed and a little sick.

He didn't think it was the long trip. He had flown for longer periods than that, pushing harder, under worse conditions. But he had also slept deeply given every chance; on this trip, the only time he had really slept enough to feel rested had been in Viridian Sea. He hadn't eaten well, either.

Presumably being invited to dinner would at least get him some food, though he was certain he would have to pay for it in aggravation.

Chapter Eight

The chamber Rise led Moon to was even more impressive than he had been expecting. It was impossible to guess the size or shape of the cavernous place. Widely-spaced fern trees had been planted in the floor and, aided by mentors' magic, grown up to spread their soft green canopies across the ceiling. The smooth gray trunks were like pillars, and water flowed through a shallow stream that had been carved into the floor, complete with floating plants. The seed nodules that grew just under the broad feathery leaves had been spelled to give off light, so the trees were actually making the light they needed to survive, an artistic touch that probably pleased the Arbora.

Even this chamber couldn't be big enough to hold the entire court, but as Rise led the way through the trees, Moon thought it might be more than half empty. Arbora and older warriors were taking their places on rugs and furs scattered on the floor, and as they passed, Moon caught many surreptitious glances. He didn't see Russet, Lithe, or Feather, or any other familiar faces of the Arbora who had been staying close to the consorts' hall. He didn't think that was a particularly good sign. He glanced at Rise, who was trying to keep her expression neutral and mostly just looked grim.

At the top of the hall, in a circle of trees meant to simulate a forest clearing, the queens and consorts were seated on rich fur rugs. "That's Onyx and her daughter queens," Rise spoke in an almost voiceless whisper. "Her consort Umber, and the consorts taken by the queens, and the young consorts of Onyx's bloodline."

Still in her winged form, Onyx was bigger and therefore older than Pearl, and if she stood up would probably be more than a head taller than Moon. Her scales were a dark copper with a red web, and her jewelry, armbands, wristbands, a belt and broad pectoral, was gold with polished red stones. All the consorts were in their groundling forms, with Umber beside Onyx, and the others lounging on the furs behind them. A few had been among the consorts who had fled from Moon in the central well, so Moon wasn't expecting any support from that quarter. The other queens were seated further away, and two of the daughter queens sat with their consort brothers. They looked young enough that they probably hadn't been out of the nurseries very long.

At Onyx's gesture, Rise led Moon to a fur in front of the group, several paces away from Onyx, with a clear separation between him and the other consorts. Rise hesitated, as if hoping to stay, but Onyx tilted her head and stared her down. Rise made a faint exhalation that might be an under-the-breath hiss, and left.

Moon sat down. Umber hadn't looked at him, and the consorts and lesser queens just cast him covert glances and quickly looked away. Onyx stared at him but said nothing. Right, that's how it's going to be, Moon thought, unsurprised. He let out his breath in a resigned sigh.

The chamber was fairly quiet, just a low murmur of talk from the Arbora and warriors seated outside the royal glade. A young male warrior who seemed reluctant to get too close set a plate in front of Moon, with cut pieces of yellow and red fruit and a round of dark brown flatbread. Others were eating already, so Moon took a piece of fruit. He had reached the point where he wasn't hungry anymore, which wasn't a good sign. He forced himself to eat, hoping by the time the meat arrived his stomach would be more cooperative. He had managed to get two pieces of fruit and a piece of bread down, when Onyx said, "So this is Malachite's lost offspring."

"That's what they tell me," Moon said, and took another bite of fruit. He realized a moment later, as the other consorts stared, that he hadn't been expected to answer. Well, it was too late now, and it wasn't as if anything he said or did here was going to change their opinion of him.

Onyx didn't register surprise, but he could sense her interest sharpen. "And you lived feral in the forest for forty turns."

"No." Moon deliberately chewed and swallowed the fruit, though it went down like a piece of rock. "I lived feral in a lot of places for forty turns."

He could tell the consorts and other queens were listening avidly, though most affected attitudes of boredom with varying degrees of success. Onyx said, "With groundlings."

"Sometimes." He licked the juice off his fingers, and added, "When they'd have me."

Onyx's spines trembled. Moon suspected his self-possession was annoying to her. She wanted him off-balance and diffident, she wanted him to attempt to ingratiate himself; she wanted something from him that she wasn't getting. Then she asked, "In their beds?" Her smooth voice held a combination of idle curiosity and contempt.

The consorts who were pretending not to listen slid sideways looks at him. The closest warriors and Arbora had gone silent.

Moon felt a wave of heat pass over him. No one at Indigo Cloud had ever asked that question, not Jade, not Chime. Not even Stone, though he had to know the answer already, since he knew Moon had been living with a groundling woman. Moon had thought it didn't matter to the Raksura. Another thing you got wrong. He said, "That's none of your concern."

Onyx tilted her head, and there was a long fraught pause. "Your manners leave something to be desired."

That was like a Tath calling a Ghobin ugly. Managing to sound as if he was really curious, Moon said, "Isn't that usually considered the fault of the birthcourt? Mine abandoned me and four Arbora children to die in the forest, so maybe they aren't the best example."

The silence spread through the big room. Onyx sat up, spines flicking. Her voice hardened as she said, "And your former queen at Indigo Cloud provided no instruction?"

Of course Onyx knew exactly where to strike back. "She didn't have much time for it. There was a Fell attack to fight off."

Onyx went still, and there was an uncomfortable stir among the consorts and sister queens. Moon had been hoping to work his way back to another reference to abandoning children, since that had worked so well the first time, but it seemed he had touched a different nerve. Were they that tense about a reference to the Fell attack that had happened more than forty turns ago, at an eastern daughter colony where Onyx and these other young queens and consorts hadn't even been present? That couldn't be it.

Probing the sensitive spot, Moon said, "She could have abandoned the court to the Fell, but she didn't." There was an indrawn breath, a deeper silence from the listeners surrounding them. "That's not a choice every queen would make—"

Onyx leapt to her feet and crossed the few paces between them in one bound, spines flared, furious. Moon fell back, half sprawled on the fur and scrabbled backward. His panicked attempt to shift was squelched as firmly as if he had been born a groundling. He snarled up at Onyx; if he was going to die or get a beating in front of half the court he wanted to at least go out fighting. Then Onyx froze.

Something had perceptibly changed in the room's atmosphere. Onyx twitched and hissed, then whipped around to face another queen who stood only a few paces away.

She was the same size and build as Onyx, but where Onyx was copper and red, she was a green so dark it was almost black. For a moment Moon thought the contrasting web pattern across her scales was a light gray, then realized it was scar tissue, spidering across her scales and obscuring the colors. She wore no jewelry except for silver and crystal sheaths on her claws. She was too old, too big for a sister queen. This had to be Malachite.

She said, "You go too far." Her voice was calm, colorless. Her spines didn't even tremble, but every Raksura in the chamber seemed to shrink.

Moon thought she was talking to him. But Onyx stepped back and made an obvious effort to drop her spines. She said, "Perhaps I did. Your offspring is as provoking as you are."

Deliberately, Malachite looked around the chamber. She might have been taking note of who was there, or trying to decide if she wanted to tear Onyx apart now or wait until later. Moon tried to shift, hoping Onyx had forgotten about him. If she had, Malachite hadn't; he might as well have tried to turn himself into a grasseater or a major kethel.

Then Malachite reached down, grabbed Moon's arm, and effortlessly pulled him to his feet. He choked back a frightened yelp; he would have screamed for help but no one here would lift a claw for him and that would just be insult piled on top of injury.

She let go of his arm and Moon wrenched away and made it exactly one pace before she caught him around the waist. Then she leapt upward.

Smothered against her shoulder, Moon couldn't see where they were going. He felt fern tree fronds brush his back as she jumped up through the tree canopy. A jolt as she caught hold of some projection on the ceiling above it, then a sideways twist and dimmer light, the sense of a smaller space, as she went through an opening into a passage. Moon went limp, the only thing he could do, hoping if she dropped him he would have a chance to bolt.

She took two more turns, moving up, then down a fairly straight passage that led into a larger space. Moon's inborn sense of direction told him where they were going. Back toward the consorts' bowers, but higher up. Then she stopped abruptly.

She let him go and Moon, still limp, collapsed. As he hit the floor, he contracted his body, rolled away from her and came to his feet in one motion.

He crouched, braced to bolt in any direction, to the nearest exit or potential weapon. But she leapt up and away from him. She landed on an open balcony high in the wall and perched there.

Moon stepped back, wary, certain he was about to be assaulted somehow. This chamber was large and round, shadowy in its upper reaches, its walls twisted into a great spiral that seemed to stretch up some distance through the trunk. The spell-lights were polished white stones set into the wood, but only a few were lit, and it made the wall carvings blurred and indistinct. The doorways on this level and the open balconies above were just dark holes. He tried to shift again but it was no use. He was shivering from reaction, the chill of the fight-or-flight reflex that he couldn't obey running unused through his veins.

Then he sensed movement behind him and spun around.

From somewhere above, a younger queen dropped down to land lightly on the floor. She was only a little taller than Moon, with green scales webbed with bronze. She started toward him and Moon jerked back with a warning hiss.

She held up her hands, claws retracted, palms out. "I'm your clutchmate, Celadon."

Moon just stared at her. He hadn't believed she existed. He hadn't thought Lithe and Feather were lying, he just...hadn't believed she really existed.

She moved toward him again and he fell back another step. She stopped, uncertain. "You don't remember me."

It took him a moment to realize he needed to answer her. "No."

"I remember you. Not in much detail. Just flashes, images, your scent." Celadon hesitated, her brow furrowed in concern. "Are you all right?"

That was a pointless question. Moon shook his head, exasperated, and looked up at Malachite. She was still on the balcony, looming over them. "What was that about?"

Celadon threw a dark glance upward. "That's a good question."

Malachite's tail twitched. From the intensity of her dark green gaze, Moon suspected that was her equivalent of a lash of rage. She said, "Onyx knew better than to expose him to the court without my permission."

"When were you planning to give permission?" Moon demanded. He was furious, he was frightened, he wasn't sure why he wanted to provoke such an obviously dangerous queen, but he couldn't seem to

help himself. "How long did you mean to keep me in an empty consorts' hall?"

Malachite, oddly enough, just looked away. Celadon's expression softened. She said, "She was waiting for me. She's afraid."

"Afraid?" Of me? Moon thought, bewildered. It couldn't be any physical fear; Malachite was the most intimidating queen he had ever seen, including Ice of Emerald Twilight and Pearl. He could see how she might be afraid of him contaminating the other consorts, yes. But he didn't see why or how that could make Malachite afraid to confront him. It certainly hadn't bothered Onyx.

Malachite still wouldn't look at him. Slowly, reluctantly, Celadon said, "There is something we need to tell you. To explain to you. I don't know if—"

Rustling sounded from a passage on the far side of the room and a warrior bounded in, then halted and shifted to groundling when he saw Malachite and Celadon. He was an older male, worried and breathing hard from what must have been a very rapid journey through the colony. "I'm sorry, I know you don't want to be disturbed. But there's a line-grandfather at the colony's entrance. A huge line-grandfather."

It was possible that Moon's heart actually stopped for a moment.

"A line-grandfather?" Celadon said. She threw a startled glance at Moon. "From where?"

"Indigo Cloud." The warrior eyed Moon warily. "He says we have something that belongs to him, and if we don't let him in, he'll tear the place apart."

Moon's head swam and he suddenly found himself sitting on the floor, bracing himself to stay upright. The polished wood felt oddly warm under his hands, as if his body was way too cold. Celadon knelt in front of him and tried to peer into his face without touching him. "What's wrong?"

He tried to say, "Nothing," but he couldn't even croak the word out. There was a commotion around him, he felt sick, then decided that maybe lying down flat was a better idea after all. After that, everything went black.



Moon came swimming up through darkness to realize someone was patting his face, gently enough but with a discernibly restrained violence, as if whoever it was would rather be slapping him. He was lying down, his head pillowed on someone's boney thigh, surrounded

by Stone's scent. Stone was saying, "Moon, when did you last eat?"

"Um," Moon managed to reply. His voice sounded dry and thick. "I don't..."

"Idiot." Stone got an arm under his shoulders and pulled him up to a sitting position, held him there when Moon nearly fell over forward. "Hand me that."

"Hand you what?" Moon rasped, then someone else handed Stone a cup. Stone tasted it, grimaced, then pushed it into Moon's hands and said, "Drink that."

Moon took a sip, knowing Stone would pour it down his throat otherwise. It was warm, unpleasantly milky, and very dense. He made a noise of disgust. Stone growled. "Drink. It."

Moon made himself take a few swallows. It was horrible, but it stayed down and it cleared his head. He blinked, realized that he was leaning against Stone, and that Celadon and Lithe the mentor crouched near them, watching with concern. Past them, Malachite paced the floor, tail sweeping back and forth, a dark presence.

"That should hold him until he can get some real food down," Lithe said, sounding contrite. She was holding a blue stoneware jug, and from the unpleasant odor rising from it, it was the source of the drink in the cup. "I didn't realize he wasn't eating."

"Because he's an idiot," Stone insisted.

Stone looked exactly the same as the last time Moon had seen him, when he had left with the others to take the Valendera and the Indala back to Niran's family. Moon was so glad to see him he could throw his head back and howl. "I was trying to eat. I kept getting interrupted." He tried to set the cup down and Stone handed it back to him. Moon took another swallow and winced. "I've gone longer than that without eating."

"But you were upset," Lithe said. "I'm sorry, I should have seen it."

Moon had been upset and starving before, too. But maybe not this upset, not for a long time. "What happened?" he asked Stone. "Where is she?"

Stone didn't have to ask who he meant. He said, "There was an accident. Everyone's fine, but she was delayed. I'll tell you later." He looked at Malachite, his one-eyed gaze hard. "We could do this the easy way. Just let me take him back to his queen and we'll pretend this never happened."

Moon was beginning to understand that Stone seemed to take a very different view of Opal Night's claim on him than Tempest, Zephyr, Pearl, or Jade.

Malachite paused to regard Stone, her dark green eyes opaque. She said, "Your queen had no right to take him."

Stone showed his teeth. "That might be true. But if we do it the easy way, then we don't have to talk to other courts about your little problem."

Malachite went still, though it was the stillness of a predator about to strike. Celadon's expression twisted between resignation and anger. Lithe gasped and almost dropped the jug.

Malachite said, quietly, with menace, "How do you know about that?"

"I can smell it," Stone said, holding her gaze. "It's faint, but it's there."

Moon rubbed the haze out of his eyes, and looked hard at Stone's expression. "Smell what?"

One of Malachite's spines flicked. She said, "Fell. He scents Fell."

Fell. At Stone's advanced age, his senses were far more acute than any other Raksura's, even a queen's. He had detected the past taint of Fell at the old Indigo Cloud colony, and known they were present some distance from the destroyed Sky Copper colony. Moon thought, Fell here? After what happened to this court? So many deaths? The Arbora would go crazy. Unless...The Fell had done to Opal Night what they had tried to do to Indigo Cloud, Feather had admitted as much. And she said Malachite rescued the survivors. Maybe she rescued all of them. Moon looked up at Malachite. "Fell crossbreeds. The Fell forced the captives from the eastern colony to breed with them, but you took the children and brought them back here."

Stone lifted his brows. "How long ago was this?"

"Forty or so turns," Moon said. Malachite hadn't reacted. He looked at Celadon. "They'd be a little younger than you and me."

Celadon threw one last frustrated glance up at Malachite, then said, "Yes. That's what happened. We have one consort and several Arbora who are half Fell. There were others, but they died as infants." She lifted her spines in a resigned shrug. "That's what they wanted me to explain to you. I was hoping to work up to it a little more gently."

That explained why there were two consorts' halls, and why the consorts of Malachite's bloodline had been moved out of the one

Moon was staying in. There was at least one consort that no one had wanted Moon to see. He asked, "Is that why Onyx got so angry when I mentioned the Fell?" Except that didn't make sense. Onyx's bloodline had never been in the east, so presumably the crossbreeds were only distantly related to her.

"In a way," Celadon said. "When Malachite and the others returned from the east, Onyx was reigning queen here. She didn't want the half-Fell children in the court. So Malachite fought her and became reigning queen. She must have assumed you knew and were taunting her."

Moon noticed Lithe was looking down at her feet, her face drawn into a wince, as if she anticipated something terrible. Her toes were dirt-smudged, showing she had been out in the gardens again. And Moon realized he hadn't seen her shifted form.

Moon looked, really looked, at Lithe's profile, but couldn't see a hint of anything but Arbora. He said, "Lithe. You're half-Fell?"

She took a deep breath, and rubbed her face. "Yes. You can see it when I shift. So...I don't shift unless I have to." She looked up at Stone, bleak and resigned. "You could tell? Is that why you tasted the simple I made for Moon?"

"I tasted the simple because I don't trust any of you people," Stone told her. "I could tell something Fell was or had been in this room, but I hadn't narrowed it down to you yet."

"And what are you going to do?" Malachite asked Stone.

"I'm taking him and leaving." Stone took Moon by the shoulders and set him aside, then pushed to his feet. He was a head shorter than Malachite, but he suddenly seemed to be taking up far more space in the room. "We took a consort of your bloodline without permission; you're hiding Fell crossbreeds in your court. I'd say we're even."

Malachite's tail twitched. "You may leave whenever you like. He is staying."

Stone cocked his head, eyes narrowed.

Celadon stood. "But I've just met him! All this time, we thought he was dead; you can't just take him away again, not so soon. Most of the Arbora and warriors haven't even seen him yet."

Moon thought that appeal might be more effective on Stone than any threat Malachite could come up with. "Why did you bring me here?" he asked, looking from Celadon to Malachite.

Celadon said, "Because you belong to us." She glared at Stone.

“They had no right to take you.”

Stone was unmoved. “Your bloodline gave up its claim on him turns ago.”

Malachite said, “I never gave up my claim.” For the first time, she met Moon’s eyes. Moon’s breath caught in his throat. It was a reigning queen’s power to touch some inner part of you, to draw it out and connect it to the rest of the court. It was part of how queens could keep other Raksura from shifting. Moon felt like Malachite had just pulled his heart right out of his body.

As if oblivious to what she had just done to him, Malachite said, “And it’s fitting that he be here now.”

Moon wrenched his gaze away and stared at the floor, trying to fight that pull.

It was Stone who said, “Why now?”

Malachite paced away. “When we reached the safety of this colony again, our mentors spent turns trying to understand what had happened to us, why the Fell had tried to make crossbreeds. They searched our histories, went to other courts to search their libraries, always careful never to speak of what had happened to us, but they never found any sign that the Fell had done anything like this before. They scryed for answers, but discovered nothing.” Malachite lifted her head. “But within the past turn, the scrying told us that another Fell flight was coming here, and that that flight would hold the answer.”

“Here?” Moon said, appalled. “To the Reaches?” It can’t be happening again.

Stone hissed in disbelief. “Fell haven’t come here for two hundred turns. They remember what happened the last time.”

“The Reaches were overpopulated then,” Malachite said. “Perhaps they wish to test us again.”

Lithe cleared her throat, and said hesitantly, “I can feel the flight out there, getting closer. It came down from the southwest.”

“You can hear the Fell?” Moon asked Lithe. He wondered what other abilities she had. The crossbreed mentor-dakti from the Fell flight who had attacked Indigo Cloud had had unusual powers of divination, much stronger than a normal mentor.

“No.” She shuddered. “But I know where they are. I’ve always known.” From her expression, it was more burden than asset. “The others—the other crossbreeds—don’t sense them like I do.”

Stone folded his arms. He still looked like he thought he was

talking to crazy people, but he was intrigued, too. “So what are you planning to do about this?”

Celadon told him, “There’s a groundling city a day of warrior’s flight away from here. We think the Fell will attack there first.” She turned to Moon. “That’s where I was when you arrived. I’ve been trying to persuade them of the danger.”

Moon stared. “Persuade them of the danger? What does that mean? Did you tell them Fell were coming?”

Celadon hissed. “Of course I did. But they’ve never heard of Fell before. They don’t believe me.”

“They don’t believe you? So you just left, let a whole city full of groundlings with the Fell about to feed on them and no idea—” He took a step forward and a wave of dizziness hit. He swayed, and Stone caught his arm to steady him.

Malachite said, “That’s enough.”



Moon and Stone ended up back in Moon’s bower in the empty consorts’ hall.

It was past sunset and the window into the hall was dark, the bower lit only by the spelled stones set into the carving. The Arbora had brought food and then scattered because Stone was intimidating, especially when he was irritated, and Moon’s mood wasn’t much better. Stone had made Moon eat before he let him talk anymore, and Moon had choked down the plates of raw meat without tasting any of it. Fell crossbreeds raised as Raksura, auguries, it was all too much to make sense of in one night. And the worse part, that the Fell were heading toward a completely unprepared groundling city. That thought brought vivid images of Saraseil to mind, the dakti hunting helpless groundlings through the streets, the kethel tunneling through the walls of stone buildings after the inhabitants who had tried to take shelter there. The fire, the gutted bodies. Fell attacks on cities were worse than on camps or small settlements. The groundlings were so often trapped in their own homes, with their defenses against other predators or groundling tribes useless against the Fell.

“There, I ate it,” he said finally, shoving the last empty plate away. The meat sat in his stomach like a rock. “Are you happy?”

“Do I look happy?” Stone paced on the far side of the bowl hearth. “I turn my back for two heartbeats and the court falls apart. All that trouble to get us back to our home colony and then this happens, you miserable, ungrateful children. I should never have bred

in the first place.”

This had been a recurring theme since leaving Malachite and the others in the queens’ hall. Moon was right: Stone’s view of Opal Night’s request for Moon’s return was radically different than anyone else’s. Stone seemed to think that Indigo Cloud had had the option of simply refusing and had only given in out of some desire to personally irritate him. Moon had earlier pointed out that he had suggested simply refusing and the others had said it was impossible, but by this point he had given up trying to argue rationally. He just said, “I’m not related to you.”

“And I should have known your whole bloodline would be crazy.” Stone stopped and glared down at Moon. “Did any other queen touch you?”

“Sort of.” At Stone’s expression, he explained, “Tempest hit me in the face. But I threw a kettle at her and made a joke about her dead sister, so I was asking for it.”

“That’s all right.” Stone resumed pacing. “But don’t tell Jade. We’ve got enough to worry about.”

“She’s really coming?”

“Of course she’s coming—” Stone stopped pacing again, frowning. “You didn’t think she was.”

Moon looked down at the hearth. His throat went tight. “We had to stop when one of the warriors was hurt, and we were three days late. Jade said she’d start the day after we left, and when she wasn’t here when we arrived...” He was still having trouble believing this was really happening. He had been trying to make himself accept the fact that he had been discarded again, that he would never see anyone from Indigo Cloud, and then Stone had walked in and the world had changed. Not very different from how the world had changed when Stone had first found him with the Cordans in the eastern jungle.

Stone sat on his heels so they were closer to eye level. “Why did you think she wasn’t coming?”

“I told you, she wasn’t here.” That didn’t really answer Stone’s question, but then Moon couldn’t answer it. Not in any way that made sense to anyone other than him. “And she had Ember.”

Stone looked honestly baffled. “Who?”

“The consort Emerald Twilight gave her to replace me!”

“Oh, the kid.” Stone dismissed Ember with a wave of his hand. “He’s your problem. I’ve raised enough kids, I’m not doing another

one.”

Moon sat there a moment, too floored to respond. He shook his head impatiently, trying to get his scattered thoughts together. “You said there was an accident but no one was hurt. What happened? Was it another platform collapse?”

Stone’s sharp gaze didn’t waver, for long enough that Moon started to feel like prey and had to fight the urge to growl. Then Stone finally relented and said, “No, it was a hunting accident.”

Relief made Moon break out into a sweat, then he realized what Stone had said. “A hunting accident?”

“Two young hunters went exploring on one of the platforms a couple of trees away and walked right into a hibernating predator.” Stone absently scratched the back of his neck. “We used to call them ‘snatchers.’ They look like snakes, but with long arms. Not much scent, and don’t make a lot of noise when they move. This one wasn’t moving until the idiots woke it up. Fortunately the warrior patrol heard them and held it off until Jade got there.” He added, as if it was an unimportant detail, “Bone said it was a good forty paces long.”

“Forty paces? But what—” Moon had the feeling Stone was leaving something out. “Why did that keep her from leaving? Did she think there were more?”

“She killed it, but she broke her right arm and cut up her shoulder.”

Moon shoved to his feet. “You said no one was hurt!”

“I didn’t want to tell you in front of them.” Stone jerked his head toward the doorway. “I preferred your crazy bloodline thinking I had a queen on her way to back me up.”

It was Moon’s turn to pace, to fight the nervous urge to bust out of here and head back to Indigo Cloud immediately. “I should have been there.”

“That was actually my point,” Stone said, his voice dry.

Moon ignored that. “She can’t fly? For how long?”

“Getting the break knocked her out and she went into her Arbora form. Heart was afraid if she shifted before she healed, it would translate to wing damage. From the time we got back to the colony...” Stone looked thoughtful. “She should be almost healed up by now. If I can get your damn birthqueen to let us leave in the morning, we can probably meet her on the way, before she gets too far.”

Moon stopped, staring at one of the wall carvings without seeing

it. Leave in the morning, go back to Indigo Cloud, go home. If someone had said that to him yesterday, if he had thought there was any real chance of it, he would have sprung at it like a starving predator at fresh meat.

And Jade hadn't lied about coming after him. None of this changed the fact that Moon hadn't produced a clutch yet, but maybe with Ember there now, Moon's shortcoming in that area didn't matter as much. Whatever it was, the smart thing to do was to get back to Indigo Cloud as soon as possible, and work on becoming so entrenched there that getting rid of him would be far more difficult.

But he couldn't. He said, "I can't go back. Not yet."

Stone said, ominously, "What?"

Moon faced him. "There's a Fell flight heading for a groundling city. A groundling city so unprepared they won't even know to run away until it's too late. And it's only a day's flight from the outskirts of the Reaches. We just can't ignore it." He couldn't believe Stone didn't see that.

Stone growled under his breath. "I know, I know. I just don't want Indigo Cloud involved with it."

So Stone did see it. "What, were you going to take me to Jade and then turn around and come back here?"

"I was considering it," he admitted. "If one Fell flight succeeds here, the others will follow. We'll have to deal with them sooner or later."

He was right, and the thought made Moon's insides cold. "So we should stay and help."

Stone pushed to his feet and stepped close, and made his words an emphatic order. "I want you out of this, and I don't want Jade anywhere near it."

"Why? We've both killed rulers. And Jade—"

"You idiot. This flight is probably coming here because it wants to make crossbreed Raksura." Stone hissed. "A few ruler-queens like Ranea would make it easier for the Fell to take on the Reaches again."

Moon turned away, sudden tension making his back teeth ache. More reason to make sure this flight was destroyed utterly. He muttered, "Stop calling me an idiot."

"Stop acting like one," Stone said, but without much heat.

Moon leaned his shoulder against the wall, making himself think

with his head and not his claws. "Maybe this flight is related to the one that came after Indigo Cloud." The flight which had destroyed the groundling city of Saraseil, who had used their cross-breed mentor-dakti to track Moon across time, to predict that he would one day go to Indigo Cloud. Maybe one of the mentor-dakti escaped and predicted I'd come here. The thought didn't help his still queasy stomach.

"Maybe." Stone stepped to the hearth and took a seat on the fur mat. He grimaced as he settled into place, rubbing his lower back. "You can tell Malachite to ask one of the rulers when she's ripping his guts out."

Moon went to sit down on the furs, suddenly aware of how exhausted he was; he didn't think he would be able to stay awake much longer. Stone looked weary too, and a little more gray than usual in the spell-light. Moon asked, "Why did it take you so long to get back to Indigo Cloud? Did the Arbora want to stop a lot?" It wasn't fun being carried for long periods of time, and Blossom and the few other Arbora who had helped Niran sail the flying ships were adventurous types. Moon had figured they would have made Stone and the other warriors land frequently so they could sightsee.

"Not exactly. We had company on the way back."

"Company?" Then Moon remembered who else was an adventurous type, who had been cheated out of his trip to see a Raksuran colony by a Fell attack. And who might find a trip to see the Reaches, the fabled homeland of the Raksura, irresistible. "Delin?"

"He gave the Arbora a ride back in another flying boat." Stone let his breath out, sounding tired and annoyed.

Moon wanted to see Delin again, and had just assumed that would never happen. But then he had also assumed he would never see Stone again. He was suddenly too tired, too overwhelmed to think about it a moment more. He pulled another fur around and lay down on it, saying, "We'll decide what to do in the morning."

Stone made a noise that combined a snort of derision and a growl. But after a moment, he moved around and lay down next to Moon.

Chapter Nine

Moon had fallen asleep immediately, lulled by Stone's reassuring presence. But deep into the night, he woke suddenly with the conviction that someone was in the passage outside the bower.

It might be one of the Arbora checking on them, but he remembered the sense that someone had been standing outside the guest chamber last night. He sat up on one elbow, and saw Stone lying on his back, eyes open.

Stone caught Moon's gaze and pointed up and to the side. Moon nodded, remembering the layout of the hall. That faint sense of presence moved up through the passage to the deserted bowers, toward the area that had shown signs of recent occupation.

Moon eased away from Stone, motioning for him to stay where he was. Stone gave him a withering look in return. Ignoring that, Moon got to his feet and moved silently to the door of the bower.

The passage was empty, the white glow of the spell lights reflecting off the curves and angles in the carving, the old claw marks scarring the polished wood. Moon climbed quietly upward toward the other bowers. Faint movement sounded from one, and he stepped into the doorway. There was a figure beside the cold hearth, just leaning down to pick up the book that lay on a cushion.

Moon said, "Did you forget to take it with you?"

The figure whipped around so fast it sat down hard, the book in its lap. It looked like a young warrior or consort, at least at first sight. His hair was dark and his eyes were green, and he had sharp features and a lean, rangy build. He was wearing a dark blue shirt and pants with a darker sash around his waist. The material was clingy enough to reveal a certain knobiness at his elbows, wrists, and knees, suggesting that he had only recently matured.

But his skin was pale, too pale, without even a hint of bronze or copper tint. When Raksura went to gray and then white with age, they lost the color in their hair as well as their skin. Only the groundling forms of Fell rulers had skin this pale when young.

So this was the crossbreed consort. Besides the skin color, Moon could see no trace of Fell.

He stared at Moon for a long moment, his tense body slowly relaxing as Moon made no move to attack. He cleared his throat and touched the book's cover. "I was reading it when they said we had to move." He hesitated. "You're Moon. I'm Shade. We have the same father."

"I know." Their consort father would have been forced to mate with a Fell progenitor to produce Shade, but there didn't seem to be any point in mentioning that. Moon stepped into the bower and paced along the wall. The hollowed-out niches held trinkets, mostly bits of jewelry, cups for a tea set, broken wooden pens, a couple of folded books. There was also a battered cloth doll, relic of Shade's not so long ago fledglinghood. It all seemed so ordinary, not the place Moon would ever have imagined a half-Fell consort to live.

Atop a wicker chest was a sheet of paper, and Moon recognized the writing as Raksuran, though he couldn't read any of it. But there were small scribbled drawings of plants, warriors in flight, and Arbora working in gardens. Drawing tools lay nearby, charcoal pieces and pens carved from reeds. He wondered if Shade had done the drawings himself. Moon had never been able to make a recognizable image on paper, even when he had tried to imitate groundlings' work, and had never seen any of the Aeriats at Indigo Cloud do it. He had thought it was a skill reserved for Arbora. "Can you hear them?"

Shade didn't need to ask who he meant. "No." Still sitting on the fur, he had twisted around to watch Moon circle the room. "Is it true you were alone all this time?"

"Yes." Moon stepped away from the drawings. "What are you going to do?"

"What? Oh, since no queen will take me, and I can't leave the court?" Shade shrugged, long fingers fiddling with the book's leather cover again. "I don't want to leave; everyone I know is here."

"You don't want a queen?"

Shade's young face was serious. "Even if there was one who wanted me, I shouldn't breed." It sounded as if he had given it a good deal of thought. "The clutch might be all right, like me and the others, but they might not."

It was...not an unrealistic view of the situation. At least no one had lied to Shade about who and what he was, and what he was likely to expect. High in the wall there was an opening to the central well, and Moon stopped beneath it, listening. It must be in a fold of the trunk that faced away from the reservoir, so the rush of falling water was more distant, and the clicks and calls of the insects sleeping in the

vines were audible. He wasn't sure what he wanted from this conversation. Maybe nothing.

Then Shade said suddenly, "Feather said you look just like our father."

Moon went still. For an instant he felt his connection to this court, to Malachite, and it tugged on him like a leash.

He turned to face Shade, who was lost in thought, turning the pages of the book. Shade said, "I never saw him, because he died, but...The other consorts who live here with me, they're descended from Malachite's sister queen who died, and they look a little like him too. So do our cross-clutchmates, in Onyx's bloodline. But they're soft, and you've got hard edges. It makes you look older and Feather said you look just like him. I think that's why Malachite was afraid to see you." Shade frowned thoughtfully, apparently oblivious to the effect this was having on Moon. "I guess that must have hurt you, but I don't think she realized what it was going to be like, seeing the image of him again. Feather said Malachite's been so filled with rage that she's barely felt anything else in forty turns. You coming back means she has to let some of that go. That's hard for her."

Moon turned away. He didn't want to believe it; he didn't want to give Malachite that much credit. But Dart had said the queen started to enter the room, saw Moon, and left.

He heard a rustle as Shade moved uneasily, maybe finally sensing that this was a difficult subject. Shade said, "What was it like, traveling out in the world?"

Root had asked Moon that once, what felt like a lifetime ago. Chime had countered the question with "what is the wind like?" but Moon wanted to give Shade a better answer. But summing up the totality of the wind would have been easier. He said, "It was hard, but...it wasn't all bad. I saw a lot of different places, and people."

"But there weren't any other Raksura?"

"I didn't know where to look for them." He turned back, and Shade's baffled expression almost made him smile. "The Three Worlds is a big place."

Shade seemed as if he was having trouble imagining it. "Did you live with a groundling court?"

"Sometimes. But when they realized what I was, I always had to leave." Shade's confusion deepened, and Moon explained gently, "In the east, where I was living, the groundlings are afraid of Raksura. They think we're Fell."

“But we—you don’t look like a Fell!”

“To them we all do.”

Shade’s brow furrowed as he turned that over. “I see. But...you must have been lonely.”

It was a surprise that Shade saw that so readily. He had always been surrounded by his court, protected by a powerful reigning queen who had fought her way through a Fell flight and killed a progenitor to retrieve the last of her dead consort’s offspring. But maybe he was aware of what could have happened to him.

Still considering it, Shade said, “The only place I’d like to see outside the court is Aventera. The warriors described it to me, and it sounds very strange. But I’m not sure I want to meet groundlings, if they’re going to be afraid of me.”

“Aventera.” Moon hadn’t heard the name before, but he could make a guess. “Is that the groundling city that Celadon went to?”

“Yes.” Shade yawned, and got to his feet, the book tucked under his arm. “I’d better go back now.” He hesitated, shy and uncertain and very like an ordinary young Raksura. “Can we talk again?”

Moon hesitated, but he was surprised to realize what his answer was. “Yes.”

Shade nodded and disappeared down the passage.

Moon waited until Shade’s steps had faded, then he went down to his own bower. Stone hadn’t moved, and Moon lay down beside him. The fur still held the shape of his body, though he had been gone long enough for it to lose the warmth. Stone didn’t comment, and after a moment, Moon said, “Did you hear all that?”

“Yes.” He was silent for so long, Moon thought that was all he was going to say. Then Stone added, “Not sure I would have done it, in their place. It would have just made it that much worse, if they’d turned wrong when they got older.”

It was a strange thing that Opal Night had done, that Malachite had done, raising these changeling children instead of killing them. Moon wondered how many courts would have done it. He thought most Raksura would have considered it mercy to kill them. Moon might have thought it himself, if he hadn’t met Lithe and Shade.

Hard as it would have been to kill something that must have looked very like a baby Raksura, it would have been much, much worse to watch it turn from a child into a monster. But Opal Night had taken the risk. Maybe Malachite saw it as another path to victory over

the Fell. Raising the crossbreeds as Raksura, to show that Raksuran blood was stronger. “So you think they were right?”

Stone rolled over, clearly putting an end to the conversation. “I think they were lucky.”



Moon woke at dawn, when Stone was stirring. Russet and two other Arbora must have been listening for them to move, because they brought a kettle and pot for tea immediately. Russet lingered as if she wanted to say something, but left when Stone glared narrowly at her.

Moon picked up the pressed cake of tea and the wooden tool used to scrape it off into the pot. “What was that about?”

“I don’t like interfering Arbora.” Stone took the cake and the scraper away, and moved the pot out of Moon’s reach. He was particular about tea.

“The Arbora at Indigo Cloud aren’t interfering?” Because that hadn’t been Moon’s experience.

Stone sniffed at the tea dubiously, then set it aside and got his own out of his pack. “It’s different when they’re related to you.”

Moon waited until Stone had the first cup down before he said, “I want to stay. I want to find out what Opal Night is going to do about the Fell and the groundling city.”

Stone hissed in pure irritation and deliberately set the cup down. It was a delicate blue ceramic, with bands of silver gray and dark green, in a complex pattern that would probably make the Arbora at Indigo Cloud sick with envy. “Are you going to say that to Jade when she gets here?”

Until last night, Jade’s arrival had felt like something from a Hassi creation myth: much longed for but expected to be apocryphal. Even knowing that she would be here soon, Moon was still having trouble thinking logically about it. He didn’t answer, and Stone continued, “And if I can’t get you out of here, do you think your crazy mother who had you dragged all the way across the Reaches is just going to hand you over when Jade asks?”

When Stone said “mother,” Moon still thought first of Sorrow and not Malachite, and it took him a moment to answer. “She doesn’t have any reason to keep me here.”

A voice from behind him said, “You don’t want to know us at all, do you?”

Moon twitched around. Celadon stood in the doorway. Distracted,

he hadn't heard her arrival, but he felt fairly certain it hadn't gone unnoticed by Stone. Irritated at being caught unawares, at her for existing, at Stone, he told her, "No, I don't. Why should I?"

Celadon stepped forward, spines flicking in agitation. "We're your bloodline. We're responsible for you—"

Moon shoved to his feet. "You left me to die in a forest. That's what you're responsible for."

"That wasn't me, I didn't leave you! I was a fledgling myself, whether you remember or not." Celadon's spines snapped up, trembling with fury. "I lost you, I lost our clutchmates, the others in the nurseries, I lost our father, I lost Twist and Yarrow, the teachers who took care of us, almost everyone I knew." She turned away, and her tail lashed angrily. "You are the only thing I've ever gotten back from that time."

"It's too late!" Moon snarled at her. He knew he wasn't being fair, but the mix of anger and pain wouldn't let him admit it. "I can't be him again, I'm something else."

"I don't expect you to!" She rounded on him, baring her fangs. They glared at each other, then Celadon took a deep breath, forcing her spines down, deliberately calming herself. "I know you're different now." Reluctantly, she added, "Do you hate us so much?"

"I don't hate you," Moon said, though he wasn't sure if that was true. "I just don't know why you want me here."

She hissed, exasperated. "Because you're part of us."

"It's too late for that, too."

She watched him, her spines going completely flat as the last of the anger left her expression. Finally, she said, "Malachite wants to see you." She tilted her head toward Stone. "And the line-grandfather."

Stone set his teacup down. "Good."



Celadon led them to the queens' hall, where they had argued last night. Moon was assuming this was the queens' hall for Malachite's bloodline, and that Onyx and her daughters had a separate set as far away as possible.

In the day, shafts of light fell down from the well high overhead to light the carvings winding up the wall. Malachite waited for them, sitting to one side of the bowl hearth with several Arbora, including Lithe and Russet, behind her. Also present was Malachite's warrior

Rise, a few other older female warriors and, surprisingly, Shade. Shade was the only one who smiled when Moon walked in.

Moon knew enough by now to recognize the formal setup: the way the Arbora and warriors were dressed in the silky flowing fabrics of their good clothes, the tea set beside the hearth that no one would probably use, the arrangement of the seating mats and cushions. He just had no idea what it meant in context with his situation. You could have asked Celadon, he told himself, if you hadn't been busy yelling at her.

Celadon moved past to sit near Malachite, and Moon and Stone took seats opposite the queens. Apparently, there was no older male consort who belonged to Malachite. Which meant Malachite hadn't taken another after Moon's father had been killed.

Malachite broke the silence first, saying to Stone, "Do you still plan to tell other courts about our crossbreed children?"

Shade twitched, startled, and looked anxiously from Malachite to Stone.

Unperturbed, Stone said, "Was I supposed to be reconsidering it?"

Malachite's voice stayed level. "Answer me."

Stone countered, "Are you still planning to steal Indigo Cloud's consort?"

"You and I both know you had no right to take him."

We could be here all day, Moon thought. If Malachite was one tenth as stubborn as Stone, this could go on for the rest of the turn. He said, "Isn't it my fault, for agreeing to be taken?"

Everyone stared at him, as if they had all expected him to just sit silently. Stone hissed, "Shut up."

"No, you shut up." The swipe Stone took at his head was half-hearted and Moon ducked it easily. He kept his gaze on Malachite. "Isn't it my fault?"

Malachite didn't answer, though her tail made a slow lash. Celadon's spines rippled in annoyance and she said, "You didn't know any better. You—"

Malachite said, "Quiet."

Celadon subsided reluctantly. Moon said, "I didn't know any better. And all Indigo Cloud knew was what I told them. So if you don't hold me responsible, then you can't hold them responsible. They had every right to take me."

There was a moment's silence. Malachite's tail did that slow lash again, that Moon couldn't interpret. It occurred to him at that point that they could very well blame him for accepting Jade without his birthcourt's permission. He should have bothered to find out what the punishment was for that, but at worst it would be exile from Opal Night, which wouldn't leave him any worse off than he had been before. Though it would be somewhat ironic.

Then one of the older Arbora said, admiringly, "He argues like a mentor."

Stone said, "He argues, period. Are you sure you want him?"

"Yes," Malachite said, simply.

"Why?" Moon made his voice hard. He knew he was susceptible to her; he didn't want to lose his resolve. "Do you have a court you want to sell me off to? You think another queen would ever want me, a feral solitary who's already taken?"

Malachite stood, stalked forward three deliberate steps until she stood over him. Moon just looked up at her, refusing to let himself flinch away. His skin itched with the urge to shift. In a voice rough with fury, she said, "I know nothing of this queen or this court. Why did she take you if she thought you were a solitary?"

Stone half uncoiled from the floor, not quite pushing in front of Moon but making it clear he was there. "She took him because she likes him. I thought she would; that's why I brought him to her."

Moon said, "You can ask her when she gets here."

Malachite stared down at him, her eyes as hard and opaque as dark glass. Then she stepped back. "I will."

There were relieved hisses from the other end of the room.

As she moved away, Stone eased back down into a sitting position and gave Moon a look that was irritation mixed with relief.

Moon took a deep breath without making it obvious, feeling the skin of his back ripple, settling the spines he wasn't wearing at the moment. He seemed to have won the point, or at least part of it. Time to push a little further. "Are you going to warn the groundlings about the Fell?"

Malachite's spines shivered, but she didn't answer immediately. She settled herself back into her place, and tilted her head to Celadon. Celadon said to Moon, "I've tried. I've visited them twice, but they've never heard of Fell before, not even as stories."

They were very far west, but Moon found that strange. Even the

peoples of the inland freshwater sea had heard of the Fell. Or at least Ardan had heard of them. But he had been a scholar as well as a collector; maybe the Fell weren't common knowledge in this part of the west. He said, "If they don't know anything about the Fell, it makes them even more vulnerable."

There was a restrained stir from the Arbora, whether of agreement or censure, Moon couldn't tell. Celadon said, "I can try again. But if they won't listen to me, there isn't much I can do."

"Let me try." Moon had no idea if they would let him leave the colony, but the chance of having something positive to do was too good to resist. "I've seen groundling cities destroyed by the Fell. I can tell them how it will happen, what the Fell will do to them, what to watch out for."

The silence stretched. The Arbora and warriors stared at Moon again, shocked and a little incredulous. He realized they hadn't heard this part of the story before. Maybe they wouldn't believe him.

Stone said, reluctantly, "He's right. He's seen a lot of Fell. To put it mildly."

Unexpectedly, Celadon turned to Malachite. "I would agree to take him with me to the city to try again. Even though the groundlings are stubborn, it's cruel not to try to convince them of the danger. And if the Fell take the city, it will only give them a secure place to attack us and the rest of the Reaches." She added, "But if we do this, we should go today. Before the Fell get any closer."

Russet leaned forward, her expression worried. "With the Fell nearby, isn't it too dangerous to let a consort leave the colony?"

Moon didn't laugh, didn't make a comment about all his turns outside a colony. He thought Stone's sardonic expression said it all. Celadon flicked her spines uncomfortably, as if all too aware of the irony, and said, "I think we all realize that Moon is different."

Malachite didn't respond to Russet. She regarded Stone thoughtfully. "I assume the line-grandfather would accompany you."

Stone said, "I would."

"How do I know he won't simply take you back to Indigo Cloud?"

"He knows I wouldn't go." Moon turned to look Stone in the eye. "And if he forced me to go, he knows I'd just come back."

Stone's expression promised another slap to the head in Moon's near future. He said, "'He' knows the queens involved would rather fight this out than be reasonable."

Malachite showed the tips of her fangs. “You mean give in to your demands.”

“Exactly.” Stone wasn’t intimidated. “The other courts are going to find out about your crossbreeds eventually.” Stone held her gaze for a long moment. “You’ll need an ally. Indigo Cloud could be one.”

Even through Malachite’s opaque expression, Moon could tell she wasn’t moved by that possibility.

Then Shade eased up to kneel beside her. “Can I go to the groundling city too? If my half-clutch-brother and the line-grandfather are going—”

Moon wasn’t sure what surprised him more, that Shade had dared to ask or Malachite’s reaction. Malachite ruffled Shade’s hair with an air of exasperated affection. “No, you may not go. Not until you are as old and wise as your half-clutch-brother.”

Moon stared, taken aback. He wanted to see the description as ridicule, but no one else was reacting to it that way.

Malachite’s gaze crossed his but she didn’t give any sign that she had noticed his reaction. Celadon pushed to her feet and said, “I’ll gather my warriors, if the consorts are ready to leave.”

As the warriors and Arbora started to stand, Moon got up and walked out to the passage at a reasonable pace, trying to make certain nothing he did could be interpreted as fleeing. It’s a trick, he thought. She just wants you to think that...that she wants you back, like she and Celadon said. He didn’t want to believe that. It was much easier to hate them for leaving him behind all those turns ago. Even if you know it’s completely irrational.

Stone stopped beside him and frowned. “What’s wrong with you now?”

“Nothing.” Moon gritted his teeth.

Stone might have persisted, but Celadon reached them and said, “You weren’t surprised to see Shade, and you didn’t ask who he was.”

She was trying to sound neutral, but Moon caught the hint of worry in her tone. “I talked to him last night.”

“Oh.” Celadon frowned, now clearly worried. “Did he come to see you?”

“No. He came for something he left behind, and I heard him.” She still looked uneasy, and he added, “I didn’t try to kill him, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Now she was just annoyed. “That’s not what I was wondering. It’s just that he’s sheltered. He doesn’t understand how other courts would react to him—”

“He can’t help what he is,” Moon said. Shade was sheltered, but he wasn’t a fool, either. “And I think he does understand.”

He thought she would dismiss that immediately, but after a moment’s thought, she shook her head in regret. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I just want to think he doesn’t realize.”

Behind them, Stone sighed in irritation. “So are we going to this groundling city or not?”



They flew to the west, Moon, Stone, Celadon, and her escort of five warriors.

It was a bright sunny morning, the sky a clear blue only lightly dotted with clouds. Below them, the terrain grew more rocky, and the mountain-trees more isolated, until they stood out as individual islands, their giant canopies spread like clouds. Each tree was surrounded by outcrops and deep narrow gorges, overflowing with heavy green vegetation.

Finally there was only one mountain-tree in sight, a squat one with a canopy shaped more like a bush; Celadon guided them down toward it. They landed in the roots, on a rocky outcrop where a pool had formed to catch the water runoff from the tree’s knothole. Celadon told Moon, “This is the last good water before the plateau, and there’s usually game in this area. Are you hungry?”

“Not yet.” Moon folded his wings and stretched. The wind, with no mountain-trees to break it, was strong and gusty. “I can wait, if the warriors can.” He suspected she had broken their journey here for his benefit, to make certain the delicate consort wasn’t struggling to keep up with her warriors’ pace. He actually felt better than he had since arriving at Opal Night, a state which was probably directly proportional to the speed they were flying away from it, but he wasn’t going to mention that.

As the warriors went to drink from the pool, Celadon said, “Opal Night is not a bad court to live in, you know. Even Onyx’s bloodlines get along with each other.”

Or maybe this was why she had wanted to stop, for a chance to talk him into submitting to Malachite’s will. Moon snorted, deliberately provoking. “Isn’t that unusual for Raksura?”

Celadon refused to be provoked. “As you might imagine,

Malachite doesn't tolerate troublesome behavior. And Onyx may take every opportunity to test Malachite, but she doesn't let her daughter queens squabble either. That's the only thing they agree on."

Moon wondered what life as a fledgling in Opal Night had been like. He thought of the sleek confidence of the young consorts of Onyx's line, Celadon's even temper, and Shade's sunny disposition, and felt a surge of jealousy. Still trying to get an angry reaction out of her, he said, "You didn't mind being raised with crossbreed Fell?"

She lifted her brows. "You think we weren't? We were all in the nurseries together from the beginning. Most of us were too young to remember what had happened to the court, or much of the trip to the Reaches, but it was never hidden from us." Her gaze went to the plains ahead, where the morning light was turning the tall grass into gold waves. "But still...The Arbora who survived the attack on the eastern colony talk about how happy the court was there. We're not sad now, but it hangs over us, the gaps in our bloodlines."

Moon had heard enough. He didn't want to think about being part of that close-knit group of survivors, trusting each other and trusting Malachite, returning to the safety and security of Opal Night's home colony. He started for the pool.

Celadon squinted upward. Stone hadn't landed, and was circling overhead. "Is something wrong with the line-grandfather?"

"He doesn't like to stop." Moon hopped further down the outcrop, to a spot where the water overflowed the pool and tumbled down the slope into the gorge. He stepped onto a ledge where he could catch the spray, and cupped his hands for a drink. The water tasted of rock and moss.

When he stepped away from the fall, he immediately scented something musky and animal; against the mountain-tree's sweet scent, it stood out like a sharp punch to the nose. An instant later he spotted it: a dark gray bipedal shape, armor-plated like a Tath but with a wide triangular head. It crept up a ridge of the outcrop, headed toward the warriors who were crouched at the edge of the pool, about forty paces above. They were facing away and hadn't noticed it yet.

Moon couldn't tell what its intent was; it couldn't mean to take on all of them. But it was better to drive it off before it got any closer. He crouched and leapt, landed on the rock above it, flared his spines and wings. It reared back, startled, but bared its impressive rows of teeth threateningly. Moon showed it his larger and sharper set of fangs.

It growled to save face, and retreated rapidly back down the slope. It disappeared into the jungle filling the gorge, ferny branches

shaking to betray its path. Moon relaxed and glanced around to see Celadon sat on the ledge next to the fall, watching him. The warriors had noticed the altercation, and all of them had flattened spines from embarrassment.

Celadon said, "They live in the bottom of the gorges around the trees in this area." She tilted her head toward the warriors. "Just because they haven't bothered us before is no reason not to be careful. A consort won't always be around to save you."

Moon wasn't sure if she was mocking him or not. It felt like she was mocking him. Remembering Tempest's reaction to his attempt to help her warrior on the way to Opal Night, he thought, Next time I'll just let them be eaten. He climbed around the outcrop, then jumped off and flapped until he caught the wind.

Rising up to Stone's level, he circled with him until Celadon and the warriors joined them again.

By late afternoon, the ground had started to rise toward the mountainous plateau that had been dominating the horizon for some time. As they drew closer, the shapes above it gradually resolved into the outlines of flying islands, rocky uneven clumps dripping with greenery. It was odd to see so many in one spot. The islands tended to move with the wind, or perhaps they followed the same lines of force that the flying boats used to travel; Moon wondered if the plateau somehow attracted them.

Closer, he realized the lines of the plateau weren't entirely natural. A great figure had been carved out of the side, into the shape of the body of a groundling seated on a throne. The statue was huge, taking up half the side of the plateau. The proportions were distorted, making the body wider than it was tall, and a large section of the head was missing, but it was still an impressive sight.

And so was the city built into it. The statue's chest and stomach, and the cliff faces to either side, had been carved out with balconies, windows, stairways, open galleries. The rock had been shaped into columns, pediments, as if these were the façades of buildings standing along a street instead of hanging out over empty air.

The plateau's broad slopes were riddled with steep gorges, with the gleaming silver bands of streams winding along the bottoms, lined by lush foliage. The streams all fed into a large lake covering the statue's feet. Along its banks, regular rows of greenery and trees revealed planting beds and orchards. Moon didn't see any roads, just the occasional meandering pathway, and at first he didn't see how the inhabitants approached their city.

Then he caught movement in the air. Below and to the right, slowly fighting the wind along the top of the plateau, was a flying boat. But it was so different from the others Moon had seen that it didn't deserve the name. A huge bronze-colored air-filled bladder sat atop the blocky wooden shape of the boat, with the rigging curving up and around it. Aborted wings and fins made of taut fabric stuck out from various spots, attached to the ropes of the rigging so they could be moved for steering. Moon had never seen a more inefficient way of traveling through the air.

Banking close to it, Moon realized that the bladder seemed to be supporting the boat, not the other way around. That's crazy. The other flying boats stayed aloft by using a fragment of the rock found at the heart of flying islands, that allowed them to float along the waves of invisible force that crossed the Three Worlds. This seemed like a much more difficult method.

The wooden cabin beneath the bladder was a complicated arrangement, with rounded bulges and open balconies, though no groundlings were visible. It had oval windows set with clear crystal, and he thought he could see movement within, but between the sun's reflection and the distortion of the crystal, he couldn't make out any detail.

Celadon dropped back even with him, calling out, "Don't get too close! It worries them."

He could imagine, as fragile as the thing looked. Moon followed her as she tipped her wings and slid away across the wind toward the statue-city.

Circling above the lake with Celadon, Stone, and the others, he thought it must be a very difficult place for ground predators or other groundling tribes to attack. Underground predators couldn't tunnel through rock and usually avoided water. But it would be easy prey for the Fell.

Several more of the flying bladder-boats were docked atop the large flat ledge that formed the statue's lap. They weren't the only flying craft; contraptions with much smaller air bladders and platforms barely big enough for a groundling to stand in made their way up and down the cliff face, some secured by ropes to balconies or pillars.

Moon followed Celadon as she banked down and they headed for the bladder-boat ledge.

Celadon dropped down to light on the open space in the center. Moon followed her, and furred his wings to leave room for the others.

The warriors held off, waiting for Stone to land and shift before they touched down. Moon shifted to groundling too. The cool breeze pulled at his hair and clothes and made a whispering sound as it streamed across the bladders of the tethered boats. The ledge was paved with green marble, facing three big archways cut into the rock of the statue's chest, each bracketed with tall columns carved into spirals.

Inside the archways, several groundlings gathered, presumably to greet the visitors. Moon had wondered if they were climbers or diggers, and that was why they had built their city into the statue and the cliff. But the people peering out at them from between the columns didn't have the claws or the broad strong shoulders of natural tunnel-builders. They were tall and willowy, with very pale skin tinged with gray, at least on their faces and hands; the rest of their bodies were bundled up in long brocaded coats. They had elongated eyes, high foreheads with prominent brows, and dark or silver-gray hair arranged in elaborate loops.

A woman came forward hurriedly, dressed in a silky coat in brilliant greens and blues. Stepping out from between the columns, she said, "Celadon, please come in out of the wind." She was speaking Kedaic, one of the common trade languages in the Three Worlds.

"Thank you, Ennia." Celadon glanced back to make sure the warriors had all shifted to groundling and followed the woman past the columns.

The archways opened into a high pillared hall, a market or gathering area. A painted tile fountain in the center shot water up toward the domed ceiling. Merchant stalls were scattered around the room, and Moon spotted bolts of fabric, colored glassware, and all sorts of metal trinkets. There were men and women everywhere, but they seemed to be more interested in talking in groups and staring at the Raksura than looking at the goods on display. Their attention was drawn first by Celadon's brightly colored scales, and then by the unfamiliar appearance of Moon and Stone and the warriors. They seemed curious but not afraid.

Moon was fairly sure the Fell would change that.

Ennia said to Celadon, "One of our trading aircraft has just come back from a voyage to the far west. The cargo is being dispersed and sold, and those that speculated on its success have come to hear news of it."

Celadon pretended interest as if that made sense to her, though Moon doubted it did. Raksura had little concept of the currencies that larger groundling settlements used for their trade.

Ennia led them to the far end of the big hall, then up a wide staircase to a broad gallery. Two groundlings waiting there slid open the heavy door at the top of the steps.

It led into a large sitting room. A bronze lamp with multiple rings hung overhead, the light coming from little glowing glass globes suspended from the metal loops. Benches padded with dark blue cushions and delicate bronze slope-backed chairs were grouped in a loose circle on a round thickly-woven carpet. Moon scented musky perfumes and the wood smoke overlaying rock and water and metal.

A small group of groundlings trailed in with them, and two slid the heavy bronze doors closed, shutting off the stairway and the noise from the market. Moon tried not to find that threatening, reminding himself that Celadon had been here before. But a lifetime of concealing what he was had made him extremely wary of shifting in front of groundlings, especially when they were staring at him like these people were.

Speaking Kedaic like their hosts, Celadon said, “Ennia, this is my...” She had to fumble for the right word. “My brother, Moon. And Stone, who is an important elder of the court of Indigo Cloud.”

Ennia smiled and sank gracefully into a chair. “My greetings to you. Please, sit. You did not tell us you had a brother, Celadon.”

Though for Raksura that was an incredibly inane statement, Celadon managed not to react. She said, “He has just come to visit us,” and took a seat on a bench across from Ennia. Celadon caught Moon’s eye and nodded for him to sit next to her. Raksuran etiquette dictated consorts sit behind queens at a formal visit, but he thought Celadon was wise to follow the groundlings’ customs. It would make them seem less different, and Moon felt they could use all the help they could get.

Three of the other groundlings, two men and an older woman, took seats as well though, unlike Ennia, they kept well back from the Raksura. Under the coats they all wore heavy garments, pants, long shirts and vests, all in rich colors, in fabrics that were either warm knits or heavy brocades. There didn’t seem to be much extra fat or meat on their skinny bodies, and they must need the heavy clothes against the wind and the constant cool of the rock walls. With this closer view of them, Moon realized it wasn’t just their eyes that were elongated; their heads, the long bones of arms and legs, their hands were all attenuated, even compared to Aeriak Raksura.

The warriors settled on a bench and the floor a few paces behind Moon and Celadon, jostling each other a little but not speaking. Stone

ignored the whole group, wandering the perimeter of the room, apparently looking at the painted panels covering the walls, much to the consternation of the groundlings.

Moon felt the back of his neck prickle uneasily. Stone generally liked groundlings and sought them out on his travels for news and company. He had always been polite to every one Moon had ever seen him interact with. He tasted the air, trying not to be obvious about it.

Ennia watched Stone, her dark brows drawn together, then gave Celadon a bemused smile. Celadon was too self-possessed to react or to attempt to explain or excuse eccentric line-grandfathers to Ennia. After a moment, Ennia gave in and said, "I've sent someone for my father, so he should be here shortly. He's always very pleased by your visits."

"I am anxious to speak with him again," Celadon said easily. "And I wanted my brother to see your city, and to meet and speak with you."

"I see." Ennia regarded Moon indulgently. "I'm sure our city must seem very strange to you. From my conversations with your sister, I know that you live very differently from we 'groundlings.'"

"I've lived in groundling cities before," Moon said. There was a faint startled stir from the warriors, who were probably not used to young consorts who spoke up in company, let alone groundling company. But the warriors would just have to get used to it; Moon was trying not to be impatient, but when Celadon finally broached the topic of the Fell, he wanted Ennia to realize he knew what he was talking about.

"Oh." Ennia lifted her brows, considerably taken aback. "I had the impression your people were...reclusive."

Moon wondered what word she had originally chosen and discarded. Her friends, family, servants, whatever they were, didn't have as much control over their composure, and they were uneasily watching the Raksura like people trapped in an enclosed space with possibly vicious animals. Stone, who had continued his examination of the artwork and was behind them now at the far side of the room, seemed to make them particularly nervous. Moon said, "I've traveled more widely than most Raksura."

Ennia leaned forward, interested. "You speak Kedashi very well."

"It's called Kedaic in the east." Moon suspected Kedashi was a local variation. It would explain Ennia's somewhat odd pronunciations. He thought about mentioning that in Kish, the

territory where the language was most spoken, it was considered extremely rude to comment on anyone's proficiency of speech, but he didn't want to put them at odds, no matter how condescending Ennia was.

"Really?" Ennia frowned in consternation, clearly making some mental adjustment. "I had heard that but—"

The door at the back of the room opened and a groundling man swept through, three others trailing in his wake like suckerfish after a predator. He was shorter than Ennia, but a shock of short gray hair standing nearly straight up made him look taller. He wore a dark green brocaded coat trimmed with dyed leather and fur. The other groundlings in the room popped to their feet, and even Ennia stood to greet him, going over to take his hands. "Father, you see we have guests. I'm so glad you could spare the time to greet them."

"Our air sentries reported their arrival," the man replied. "Indeed, this time they were quite hard to miss."

Moon bit his lip. He usually tried not to judge hastily based on behavior, since all tribes whether groundling, sealing, or skyling were different, but he could tell he was going to have a hard time liking these people. He still didn't think they should be eaten by Fell, though.

Celadon took the opportunity to say quietly in Raksuran, "He is Havram, their leader. They call him an 'arbiter' in the trade language but I suspect that's a mistranslation."

Havram took Ennia's arm, leading her back to her chair as if she might not know the way. She said, "Look, Father, Celadon has brought her brother Moon to see us. And—" She looked for Stone, who ambled across the room to drop down into one of the chairs, much to the nervous consternation of the groundlings he brushed past. "—Stone, who is an important official at another court."

"Well, and what do you think of our city?" Havram said. He sat beside Ennia, evidently a sign for the rest of the groundlings to sit. Not giving Moon a chance to answer, he added, "You must be very impressed with our flying craft."

Stone snorted quietly. Moon said, "They seem a little impractical, compared to others."

It was Havram's turn to lift his gray brows in mild astonishment. "Others?" He gave the impression of being too polite to show outright skepticism.

Ennia interposed, "Moon has traveled widely." From her tone, he

couldn't tell if she believed him or not.

Havram said, "I see." Small talk evidently dispensed with, he leaned back, watching them with a sharp gaze. "The people who saw your group fly in noted that there was something else with you. Some sort of large creature?"

Moon looked at Celadon, who twitched a spine in irritation. She said, "As some members of our species grow older, they grow larger." She inclined her head toward Stone. "Stone is very old."

Ennia blinked, surprised, but Havram's gaze merely sharpened. He said, "Really? That seems a very odd thing to happen."

"We are very odd people." Celadon managed to smile without showing her fangs. "He can demonstrate if you wish."

The other groundlings were hard put to control their reactions.

Havram apparently decided she wasn't lying. He made a dismissive gesture. "A demonstration isn't necessary." He regarded Stone with a bland smile. "I see you will be a most intriguing guest."

Stone leaned back in his chair, elbow propped on the bronze arm, eyeing Havram as if deciding whether he was too bony to eat or not. He said, "I'm more interested in your other guest."

From the way the groundlings all stared at Stone, they must have assumed he didn't speak or understand Kedaic. Ennia recovered first, exchanged a puzzled look with Havram, and said, "What other guest?"

"The Fell ruler," Stone clarified. "He eaten anybody yet?"

Chapter Ten

Moon thought, sourly, Well, that could explain a lot. Why the Aventerans had been so reluctant to listen to Celadon's warnings, for example. He felt a wave of tension pass through the warriors behind him, and Celadon cocked her head at Havram, her spines trembling with the effort not to rise. They were too late, and had been too late before Moon had even asked to come to the city; the Fell were already here.

Havram seemed to think Stone's question was just an inappropriate joke. "Our guests are not in the habit of eating anyone. As far as we know."

One corner of Stone's mouth twitched in a brief smile, acknowledging the veiled insult. "You don't know what he is, then."

Ennia sat forward, frowning. "What do you mean?"

Stone said, "There's a Fell ruler in your city, not far away from this room."

Havram laughed, though he didn't sound very amused. "Is this another attempt to convince us such creatures exist?"

Celadon's spines twitched before she firmly pressed them down again. Havram didn't understand the dangerous ground he was treading. Raksuran queens didn't like to be called liars. Her voice hard, she said, "The last time we spoke, you were unwilling to acknowledge the danger, but you were not so contemptuous of my attempt to warn you. What has changed?"

Ennia said uncertainly, "My father meant no offense."

Celadon didn't bother to answer that. She asked Havram, "We exist; why do you doubt the Fell?"

Havram shook his head and smiled faintly. He's too certain, too unwilling to listen, Moon thought. Either Havram was a stubborn bastard, or...The ruler's already been planting suggestions. Confused, Ennia said, "But why do you think one of these creatures is nearby?"

"I can smell it," Stone said, "in the draft around the edge of this room." He nodded toward a small round opening at the top of the far wall. "That's not outside air."

Havram didn't quite sneer. "Your senses are that acute?"

But Ennia said, "We do have a guest, a stranger who has never been here before. He came in with a cargo vessel from the deep west, to speak of trade contacts between Aventera and his city. But he was well known to the traders."

Moon exchanged a look with Stone. Fell rulers had the ability to influence the minds of groundlings. They could do it to Raksura as well, though fortunately it seemed to take far more effort. Before the attack on the old colony, the Fell had done it to Balm, using her as a source of information about the court, though she had no memory of it and no idea what had happened. It had been a more exact way of learning the court's plans than the divinatory visions of their crossbreed mentors. Moon asked Ennia, "How many traders were on the vessel?"

The skin of Ennia's gray-tinged brow was furrowed with doubt. "Only five. There had been more, but they encountered disaster along the way, they said, and lost several members of their party to accident."

Celadon hissed low in her throat. Moon said, "Fell rulers can make groundlings believe things that aren't true, but they can't do it to too many at once. It had to get rid of most of the group, so it could keep the others under control."

Ennia smiled in relief. "But he isn't with them anymore. If he had some power over them, they would have warned us when he left their presence—"

Moon held her gaze and willed her to listen. "They believe what he's told them. They don't remember that he killed their friends and forced them to take him on their ship. It should wear off, with time, but I bet he hasn't been here very long."

Ennia's troubled expression deepened, and the other groundlings glanced uneasily at each other, but Havram was still skeptical. He said, "That is a very convenient power to have."

Stone said, "You've spoken to him, spent time with him, but Ennia hasn't."

Havram turned to him sharply, suspicious. "Yes. How did you know?"

Celadon grimaced in realization. Moon looked at Stone, who rolled his eyes. Yes, we have to stop this. Right now. Before the ruler managed to increase his hold on Havram, and Havram handed the city over to the rest of the flight. Moon said, "Show us where he is, and

we'll explain."

Celadon added, "If he is just a groundling trader, he has nothing to fear from us."

Ennia started to speak, hesitated, and glanced sharply at Havram. Havram was obviously annoyed, and didn't bother to conceal it. He said, "Find him yourself, if you can."

Moon tightened his jaw, suppressing a frustrated hiss. Havram's apparently natural arrogance combined readily with the Fell ruler's influence; when Stone proved him wrong, he was just going to be that much more difficult to reason with.

Stone's expression didn't change. He got to his feet and started for the door.

Havram and Ennia followed them out of the chamber, and a few members of their entourages trailed along after them. Celadon told the warriors to stay behind, much to their dismay. Ennia ordered some of her groundlings to stay behind with them, also much to their dismay.

Stone stopped on the gallery. Moon had a bad feeling; the wind was entering the big market chamber below, right off the flying boat landing platform. If the Fell scent came from outside the city, carried by the wind...

But Stone turned toward an archway that led further into the mountain.

It opened into a big corridor and then a stairwell cut out of the rock, leading up. It wasn't as cave-like as Moon had expected. The mottled gray walls were carved to look like plastered panels, and more bronze lamps hung from the curved ceiling, with the little glass balls glowing with light.

Behind him, Havram said, "So far this could be a lucky guess."

Stone didn't pause. "If that ruler thinks you're an easy target, the others will come to this city and kill and eat everyone they can catch. That's how Fell survive."

Ennia said, "We are not an easy target," but her expression was troubled. Havram squeezed her hand in reassurance.

In Raksuran, Celadon said to Stone, "Sending them into a panic won't help. Just find the damn Fell."

Stone stopped to regard her directly, forcing the rest of the party to abruptly halt. "I'm not part of your court, and even if I were, you wouldn't have the authority over me, little daughter queen."

Celadon bared her teeth at him. Moon hissed, “Stop it.”

Amazingly, it worked. Celadon stepped back, and Stone gave her one last hard glare, then continued.

The stairs opened into the middle of another wide corridor that angled back into the depths of the mountain. It was two levels high, with galleries running along the upper section. Doorways lined the galleries, and the lower level held archways opening into more passages. It looked like the connecting center of a number of living areas.

Groundlings walked along the upper and lower levels, or stood in groups and talked. Most were the tall, elongated Aventerans, but a few were shorter and wider, though with the same coloring, probably a related race from somewhere further west.

There were small fountains in the wall, designed so someone could hold a container under the spigot, meant to supply the inhabitants of these rooms with drinking water. An older woman sat on a blanket on the floor, with dozens of cups, a dipper, and a big copper pot, apparently selling the smoky-scented liquid inside. As Moon and the others appeared, everyone nearby stopped talking and stared.

Stone turned right without hesitation, moving purposefully down the corridor. Havram, about to make a comment, frowned instead. Ennia explained, “These corridors are where traders, air vessel crews, and visitors are quartered.”

Watching Stone, Celadon asked, “Does this trader know about us?”

That was a good question. Moon glanced at Ennia to gauge her tone as she answered, “I believe my father told him we had spoken to people calling themselves Raksura.”

“And what did it say?” Celadon sounded as if she had a suspicion already.

“It—He spoke to my father and some other traders.” Ennia made a throwaway gesture. “I’m not really certain...” Which probably meant the ruler had filled Havram’s head with suspicion about Celadon’s motives and possibly stories of Raksuran betrayals and perfidy.

Stone reached a set of wrought metal stairs leading to the second level gallery and started up. Moon didn’t need to look at Havram to know they were on the right track. He felt his shoulders tense and his back teeth itch as he scented the Fell taint, carried on the cool damp

draft from above. It came from one of the doors along the gallery.

“Stone...” Moon lengthened his steps and started up the stairs after Stone, Celadon behind him. He’s too big. He can’t shift in here. Even with the corridor’s width and tall ceiling, the supporting rock-carved columns were too close together. “Wait, don’t—”

Don’t open the door, he meant to say, but didn’t get the chance. Just as Stone reached the top step, the nearest door burst open and a Fell ruler shot out.

In the east, Moon’s shifted form had been mistaken for a Fell ruler more times than he could count. This creature was about the same size and color as a young Raksuran consort, but it had smoother scales and webbed, leathery wings. Instead of spines, a rigid bone crest fanned out behind its head.

Moon shifted in reflex as groundlings screamed. Stone ducked aside but the ruler slammed into him and knocked him over the railing as it leapt from the gallery. Stone hit the rock floor below and landed in an ungainly sprawl.

Celadon dove over the stair railing, claws outstretched, but the Fell’s tail whipped out of her grasp. She landed in a crouch and sprang after it.

Moon started for Stone first, but Stone waved him away, shouting, “Go, go after it!”

Moon spun and bolted after Celadon. An older, larger queen would be more than a match for a ruler, but with a young queen like Celadon it might get the upper hand.

He rounded the corner ahead in time to see Celadon disappear down a side passage, leaving a trail of shouting, terrified groundlings. Moon went down the passage in three long bounds and tore around the corner after her.

At the end of the corridor, over the heads of fleeing groundlings, he saw that the wall opened into a big hollow shaft with chains hanging down. The Fell climbed up them, Celadon in close pursuit. Moon leapt up to the gallery, raced along it to the end, then flung himself off the railing and into the shaft. He caught the chains and climbed after Celadon.

After a few moments he realized one of the chains was moving down and the other was moving up, and that the wood and metal ceiling overhead was coming toward them. This is a cargo lift. The Fell must have realized it too, as it leapt to a stationary chain hanging to the side of the shaft, a guide line for the platform coming closer and

closer. Celadon followed, leaping to catch the swaying chain, and Moon leapt after her. His weight swung it even further and it bounced him off the wall.

Above, the ruler glanced down, snarled, and climbed the last few paces to the platform, caught the edge and slung itself over. A chorus of groundling shrieks erupted from overhead.

Moon followed Celadon over the edge, his claws scraping painfully on the platform's metal surface. Bails and boxes were stacked on it, with three terrified Aventerans huddled together and staring in wide-eyed terror. One bigger man lay sprawled near them, breathing in choked gasps, bleeding from claw rips across the chest.

Fortunately the Fell had been too busy fleeing Celadon to stop and tear them all apart; it climbed the chains away from the platform, toward the square of daylight in the side of the shaft another hundred paces or so up. Celadon followed it and Moon followed her.

It reached the opening and vanished outside. Moon drew breath to shout a warning, but Celadon stopped just below the lip of the square doorway and clung to the chain; her tail lashed in frustration. Good, Moon thought in relief. Celadon was experienced enough to realize the Fell would be waiting above the opening to drop on her as soon as she came out. It knew the two of them could catch it in the air, so it had to kill or wound them before it flew away from the city. As Moon climbed up below her, she bent down to him and mouthed the words, "I'll go out first. When he drops on me, you get him from behind."

Moon had a better plan. He shook his head and mouthed back, "I'll go first; you get him from behind." She glared at him, baring her teeth. He persisted, "You're stronger." Celadon could rip the ruler's head right off; Moon didn't have that kind of upper body strength. The ruler might have time to bite Celadon's throat out while Moon was trying to get his claws through its hide.

Celadon hesitated, then grimaced in frustration and motioned him to go.

Moon climbed around her and clung to the chain above her head. The view out the square window was of empty sky and the outer edge of the lake. Moon took a deep breath and flung himself off the chain, caught the edge of the opening, and dove out.

It would have worked, if Moon hadn't been a consort. The ruler saw his black scales and twisted away, realizing there was a queen about to hit him from behind. Moon spun in midair, clawed for the ruler. The ruler yanked his wings out of Moon's reach and dove past

him.

Celadon shot out of the opening, snarling in thwarted fury, and passed Moon, who angled his wings and rolled to get reoriented. They were just below the curve of the giant statue's shoulder, balconies dotting its chest below them.

Celadon tried to cut upward to get above the Fell but a powerful gust of wind tossed all three of them like leaves. Then patches of the rock facing on the statue exploded in little bursts of dusty fragments. What—Moon had time to think, then Celadon shouted, "Projectile weapons!"

Moon saw one of the flying bladder boats hung in the air several hundred paces off. Two groundlings were out on one of its balconies, pointing long tube-like weapons at them. Right, that's all this situation needed.

The ruler realized it too, and angled into a steep dive. Moon banked down and saw it was headed for a balcony a couple of hundred paces straight down where several groundlings stood. As Moon dove after the ruler, he caught a glimpse of Havram and Ennia among the shocked, upraised faces. He had time for the sour thought, Maybe this will finally convince Havram.

Groundlings scattered and Ennia shoved Havram out of the way, but the ruler landed on the balcony and snatched one of the smaller Aventerans.

Moon hit the paving in a half crouch, braced to leap on the ruler. Celadon landed a few paces away. The ruler's captive was a young male Aventeran, his expression terrified and desperate, his hands already bloody from his instinctive grab at the clawed fist around his throat. Moon glanced at Celadon. She was breathing hard, and from her narrowed eyes it was from rage rather than exertion. The ruler's intent was clear. If they came at him, he would gut the boy.

The ruler said easily, "How unusual, to see a consort outside a court, only one young queen for protection. So vulnerable." He was speaking in Kedaic, the way Fell always spoke the language of their prey.

Moon showed his fangs. This close, more sheltered from the wind, the Fell stench was thick. "Free the groundling and you can have me," he said, not that he thought it would work. Presumably the ruler would realize that Moon hadn't chased him through the city because he was reluctant to fight.

Celadon's spines rattled in threat. She said, "Take us both."

“Perhaps later.” The ruler laughed.

Behind them, Ennia said, “Free the boy, and we will not pursue you. Or you can have trade goods, precious metal. You know how wealthy we are—”

The ruler ignored her. He said to Moon, “You must not be a particularly valued consort, for a queen to use you as bait.”

Celadon hissed, but Moon had heard it too often to be bothered anymore. He made himself look away from the boy, whose gray skin was going white from shock, and focus on the ruler. Moon said, “You had the groundlings fooled until you ran. Your flight will be disappointed. You could have handed this city to them, and instead you’re going to die in it.”

“I told the groundlings nothing but the truth. They have nothing to fear from me.” Fell never admitted to lies, almost as if they thought truth was whatever they said it was; arguing with one about what was true and what wasn’t was as pointless as talking to a well. “And perhaps I have accomplished everything exactly as planned. I am Ivades. What court are you from?”

Celadon flicked a glance at Moon, and answered, “What does it matter to you?”

He’s young, Moon thought suddenly. The question had been too direct, not subtle enough. Young and curious and overconfident, bored with pretending to be a trader among people who had never heard of Fell before and were easy prey. If this flight came from the east, maybe this ruler’s never been this close to a Raksura before, let alone a consort. Surely they could use that, somehow.

Then Ivades said, “Is it perhaps Opal Night?”

Moon went still. Celadon snarled, “How did you know that?”

Ivades’ tail lashed in amusement.

Putting contempt into his voice, Moon told Celadon, “It’s nothing. The groundlings told him about us.”

That had the desired effect. Ivades answered, “We know much about the machinations of the Raksura.” It looked from Celadon to Moon with that unnerving intensity, then its gaze settled on Moon. It was probably trying to affect Moon’s thoughts somehow, the way it could affect a groundling’s, but Moon didn’t feel anything. “We know Opal Night has more in common with us than it will admit.”

Moon had heard this before, and Ivades was nowhere near as frightening as Ranea. “I know—Aeriat Raksura and Fell were once the

same species. Is that what you told the groundlings?”

Ivades was clearly enjoying this, though wasn't distracted enough to loosen his grip on the boy's throat. "But our relationship with Opal Night is closer than that."

"It can't be," Celadon said.

"But you have Fell children. You are part of us."

Oh, no, Moon thought, his heart sinking. This was worse than just Fell coming to the Reaches. The dead flight couldn't have shared that memory. The progenitors and rulers had died without knowing that Malachite would keep their crossbreed children. Celadon demanded, "Who told you that? How did you know?"

Ivades seemed to realize he had said too much. Or perhaps he had said exactly as much as he had meant to. He whipped away, leapt to the top of the railing in a blur of motion, dragging the boy with him.

The groundlings shouted in dismay. Moon and Celadon lunged forward, but Ivades jumped and flung the boy off the balcony. Both vanished.

Then two large dark-clawed hands shot up over the railing. One crushed the Fell ruler, the other carefully held the groundling. Moon hissed in relief as he skidded to a halt. Stone must have been under the balcony the whole time, holding on by his foot-claws.

Moon neatly caught the groundling as Stone released him. The boy was limp but still breathing. Then he backed away as Stone used his now free hand to pull himself up by the balcony railing. Stone leaned forward and slammed the ruler into the paving, once, twice. The third time, the ruler shifted to groundling.

Stone let go and Celadon pounced to pin the battered body to the ground. Stone shifted to his groundling form and hauled himself over the railing to stand on the balcony. Moon said, "So that's where you were."

Stone dusted his hands. "I expected the damn thing to come out further down."

The other Aventerans staggered to their feet, peered out from behind the columns. Moon shifted to groundling so hopefully no one would shoot projectiles at him, and handed off the unconscious boy to the first Aventeran brave enough to come forward.

He went to where Celadon had Ivades pinned to the floor, and crouched about a pace away. In groundling form, Ivades' skin was white and smooth, his long dark hair a tangled bloody mess. Moon

saw his eyelids twitch. "He's still alive."

Celadon shook the limp body. "Why do you want the crossbreeds?"

Ivades snarled, but it was weak and breathy. "To eat."

Ennia and Havram came forward, staring down at the creature. Ennia's gray skin was pale, and Havram's face was a mix of fury and chagrin.

Celadon put more pressure on Ivades' neck. "You can eat anywhere in the Three Worlds. How did you know to come here? How did you find out about Opal Night?"

Ivades made a noise of bitter amusement, choked out dark-colored blood, and died.



Celadon's warriors had been perched below the balcony with Stone, waiting for a chance at the Fell. There was some hysteria from the Aventerans when they climbed onto the balcony, but a few sharp words from Ennia calmed them down.

As Celadon explained the necessity of removing the ruler's head and burying it somewhere, Moon went inside to look for the injured groundling boy. He found him in a large sitting room with a colorful mosaic floor, lying on a couch with several groundlings gathered around. A man pressed a cloth to the bleeding scratches on the boy's neck, and a woman crouched anxiously beside him.

"Is he all right?" Moon asked. The boy blinked up at him, then his eyes widened in recognition. He had been staring at Moon's face through the entire tense conversation with the ruler, and must have seen enough to recognize him in his other form.

The man who was tending the boy, presumably a healer, eyed him sharply and said, "It depends. Are your claws poisonous?"

Moon set his jaw and managed not to hiss. It was good to know the groundling world hadn't changed any. "No, and if they were, it wouldn't matter, because I'm not the one who clawed him."

The woman said fiercely, "They offered themselves in my son's place. None of the rest of you did."

Moon decided Aventeran gratitude was even more uncomfortable than ingratitude, and retreated to the balcony.

Out there, Ivades' corpse still lay on the paving, but someone had tossed a blanket over it. From the outline, the head was still there.

Havram faced Celadon and Stone, while Ennia stood by. Some of the other groundlings gathered at a wary distance, but one stood next to Havram, a young man dressed in the same rich style. This didn't look good.

His voice tight as wire, Havram said, "Livan is an archimaster. He has never heard of this barbaric practice."

"Livan has never heard of the Fell." Celadon's whole body was tense, her spines trembled with the effort to stay flat, and she looked almost more angry than when facing down the ruler. "So his opinion on the best way to dispose of their remains is irrelevant at best."

"What?" Moon asked Stone.

In Raksuran, Stone replied wearily, "That's their magic-maker, here to tell everybody how this is all our fault."

"What?" Moon repeated.

"Perhaps you should go for now," Ennia told Celadon. "Later, after we speak of this—"

"Just go," Havram interrupted. "And stop trying to involve us in your disagreements."

Stone made an exasperated noise. He looked from Celadon to Moon and said, "Have you two seen enough? Are you happy now? Can we leave?"

Moon was more than ready to get out of this place. He was almost as tired of Ennia's attempts to pretend all was well when she clearly knew better as he was of Havram's obstinacy.

Celadon growled in her throat. "Yes, we can go." She stepped over to Ivades, tossed the blanket aside, planted her foot on the corpse and ripped its head off with one twist. She straightened up and said to Ennia and Havram, "The Fell will come. I hope at least some of your people survive."

They took flight from the balcony, leaping off it to fight the wind.



Celadon guided them over the plateau, out of sight of the city and its patrolling bladder-boats, to one of the flying islands. It was a small one, only a few hundred paces long and wide, and almost buried in wind-blown greenery. There was an old ruin on it, but it was just a few roofless stone walls covered in vines. One side was open to a sheer cliff where the rest of the structure had fallen away when the island had broken apart. Moon wondered if the people of Aventera knew about the stone at the heart of the islands that contained the

magic to keep them aloft. He doubted it, since they used the awkward bladder-boats for air travel.

They landed, and the warriors busied themselves finding dry wood for the crude firepit already constructed against the outer wall of the ruin. Apparently this was where Celadon had stayed on her previous visits to the city. One of the warriors told Moon, "There's a better ruin on one of the other islands, but it has flying snakes."

Moon nodded absently, then realized that the warrior had been apologizing for the lack of accommodation. Moon had slept in much worse places, but it was always interesting to be treated like a real consort.

Once a fire was built, Celadon sent the warriors away to bury the ruler's head on the plain and to hunt. Then she sat down beside the hearth with Moon and Stone. She looked weary, dispirited, and worried. To Moon, she said formally, "Thank you for insisting we go to the city again. If we hadn't, we wouldn't know...about this."

Moon shrugged uncomfortably. He wasn't particularly proud of his performance in the city. He felt it would have turned out better if he had been more persuasive, if he could have given more examples of how the Fell preyed on groundlings. The whole thing had seemed to start out well and then devolve into a disaster almost before he noticed. Not that that's unusual. But there was nothing they could do about it now. "You were right, about attacking the ruler. You should have gone out first. It wouldn't have been expecting me to follow you."

She gestured that away. "That wasn't your fault. Next time we'll both know better." She hesitated. "It's very odd, to think of fighting Fell with a consort's help."

Moon wanted to talk about the more important point. "If Malachite and the warriors killed all the rulers from the flight that attacked the colony in the east..."

Celadon said, "They did. All the rulers would have died, and they must have believed that Malachite also meant to kill the crossbreeds. There is no way another Fell flight could know she took them to the west with her," she finished, her expression grim. "Someone would have had to tell the Fell afterward. Someone from our court."

Stone said, "Then it looks like you've got a problem."

Celadon met his gaze. "It wasn't one of the crossbreeds. If they had heard the Fell speak in their heads, they would have told us."

"They might not know," Moon pointed out. "We know the Fell

rulers share memories from flight to flight, but we don't know how they do it. Or if it would work differently between rulers and crossbreed Raksura. Once this flight got close enough, the rulers could have sensed the crossbreeds without them knowing."

Celadon frowned, thinking it over. "That could be it."

Stone gave Moon an exasperated look. "That doesn't explain why the flight came here in the first place."

"Because they're Fell." Celadon gestured impatiently. "They go everywhere looking for groundlings to eat."

"And they like soft eastern cities best. It's not like there's any shortage of groundlings back there." Stone rubbed his forehead. "I don't have any answers. I'm just trying to get you to realize these are important questions."

"Yes. Yes, they are." She looked away, letting out her breath in a long sigh. "I just don't know what we should do."

Neither did Moon.

Stone just groaned under his breath and moved over to lie down on a soft patch of grass. "I need a nap. Wake me when the food gets here."

Chapter Eleven

Moon and Celadon and her warriors left the flying island at dawn the next morning. Stone stayed behind, telling Celadon that he wanted to scout the area, to try to find the resting site of the Fell flight. Moon just hoped he was careful.

Before they left, Stone took Moon aside to tell him, “You watch your back in that colony. Don’t trust any of those people.”

Fortunately, Celadon didn’t overhear.

It was a bright clear day which made for an uneventful flight, giving Moon plenty of leisure to worry, come up with various plans, and discard them. It was late afternoon by the time they reached the colony and he was no better off than he had been when they started.

But as they came over the ridge and within sight of the lower portion of the split mountain-tree, Moon hissed in surprise. Nestled between the wall and the slanting bulk of the trunk was what appeared at first glance to be a sailing ship out of water. It was a flying boat, a real one, a wind-ship of the Golden Isles.

At first Moon thought he was looking at either the Indala or the Valendera, but it was smaller than either, only fifty or so paces from bow to stern. It was tethered to the rocks and broken pillars below the colony’s landing platform, the long lacquered hull swaying in the wind, the fan-shaped sails furled and folded up into the mast. Several crew members stood on the deck, watching his approach. They were definitely Golden Islanders, all slim, most a little shorter than the average Arbora, with the distinctive golden skin. The sailors wore pants cropped at the knees and loose shirts, with scarves to contain their long white hair.

This had to be Delin’s ship, the one that had traveled with Stone’s group of warriors and Arbora, back from the Golden Isles. But what’s it doing here?

Moon dove for the ship. When he was close enough he tilted his wings to slow down and dropped lightly onto the deck. He furled his wings and shifted to groundling. Before he could speak, Chime darted from the steering cabin and flung himself at Moon.

Moon caught him, stumbled back a step as Chime hugged him

tightly enough to stop his breath. "Are you all right?" Moon croaked out, startled. "What happened?"

"Me?" Chime let him go and stepped back, badly flustered. "The warriors here said you were sick!"

"What?" The word must have gotten around that Lithe had been called to help him the night Stone arrived. "I wasn't sick, I was—" He really didn't want to explain that right now. "Where's Jade? What are you doing here?"

"She's inside the colony, meeting with their queen." Chime waved his arms. Past him, Moon saw three other familiar faces. In groundling form, Root, Song, and Floret hurried across the deck toward them. "What do you mean, what are we doing here? We came to get you."

"But Jade sent Stone—"

"Because she couldn't fly," Floret said as she reached them. "Then the nice old groundling said he'd take her on this boat—"

"She means Delin," Chime interposed. "We got here this morning, then the Raksura here wouldn't tell us where you were, or where Stone was—"

Moon interrupted, "We were with Celadon. Is Jade meeting with Onyx or Malachite?"

"I don't know." Chime looked past him, frowning. Moon glanced back to see that Celadon had followed him down and now stood perched on the railing, shading her eyes to look up at the mast with its fan-folded sails. Her warriors must have gone ahead into the colony. "Who's Celadon?"

"She's my clutchmate."

"Oh," Chime said, startled and for some reason sounding pleased. "That's good." Song and Floret exchanged a relieved look.

Moon was in too much of a hurry to wonder about their odd reaction. "I'll be back. I need to find Jade."

He shifted and bounced back to the railing to land next to Celadon. "What is this thing?" she asked, looking down at the Islander crew, who stared at her with equal curiosity.

"Jade's here." Moon hoped he sounded mostly calm. "My queen, from Indigo Cloud."

Celadon quirked her spines, bemused. "She travels on this contraption?"

"Just this time. She couldn't fly; she was wounded." Moon

crouched and leapt across and down to the landing platform. The entrance doors already stood open, and a few Arbora and warriors gathered there, watching the flying boat as if they wanted to examine it more closely but weren't certain of their welcome. As they hurriedly made way for Moon, Celadon caught up with him. She said, "I take it her arrival is a good thing."

He remembered he hadn't said anything to Celadon about Jade specifically, just that he wanted to leave Opal Night. "Yes."

She watched him a moment, as if undergoing some inner debate. Abruptly she made a decision. "It's probably Onyx who agreed to meet her. Come on."

She led the way from the greeting hall and took the same passage that Rise had shown them when Moon had first arrived. As they passed the big opening into the central garden well, Moon heard voices and caught Jade's scent just before they reached the queens' greeting chamber.

The room was better lit than it had been that first night, glowing stones catching highlights in the carved images of the warriors and the queen arching across the ceiling. But all Moon could see was Jade, with Balm, seated across from Onyx and an array of Opal Night daughter queens and warriors.

Balm saw him first. At her startled intake of breath, everyone looked up.

Jade whipped around, then pushed to her feet. Her gaze went from Moon to Celadon, and her spines started to lift. Celadon's started to lift in response.

It finally dawned on Moon why Chime and the other warriors had been so disturbed to see him with another queen. Exasperated, he said, "She's my clutchmate."

Jade's spines froze. She looked from Celadon to Moon again, searching for that bloodline resemblance that only queens could see. The hard line of her jaw softened and her spines lowered. Celadon lowered her spines in response, with a tail twitch of amusement. She said, "I'm Celadon, daughter queen to Malachite of Opal Night."

Jade said, "Jade, sister queen of Indigo Cloud." Then she added, "I would like to speak to my consort in private."

Onyx's spines and tail twitched with irritation at the interruption. "He is no longer your consort."

Jade's lip curled, but before she could respond, Celadon said to Onyx, "And he's not yours to order." She glanced at Moon, then

inclined her head to Jade. "Come to our consorts' hall and you can speak to him there."

Onyx lashed her tail but didn't object.

Balm stood to accompany them, and gave Moon's wrist a quick squeeze as she stepped past him. They followed the two queens through the empty passages, and Moon realized he had no idea what he was going to say to Jade, or what Jade was going to say to him.

"I'm surprised Onyx greeted you," Celadon said to Jade. Moon was surprised, too. Jade had managed a bigger dent in Opal Night's impenetrable surface than Tempest had, and in much less time. Celadon continued, "Onyx hasn't wanted to involve herself in... this situation. She refused to greet the Emerald Twilight queen who brought Moon."

"I think it was our flying boat," Jade answered with a trace of wryness. "She was so curious, she had to ask about it."

A few Arbora lurked in the passage, but the consorts' hall itself was empty. Celadon told Moon, "I have to tell Malachite what we discovered in the city." She glanced at Jade. "Don't be long."

Jade gave Celadon a nod and a noncommittal expression. Balm followed her out, and Moon found himself facing Jade. His heart pounded so hard he knew she could hear it.

Her expression was worried, the small blue scales above her brow furrowed with concern. "They said you were ill."

He shook his head. "I just didn't eat or sleep much for a while and it caught up with me."

She lifted her brows. "Didn't eat or sleep?"

"It was an accident." He hoped that was the last time he had to explain that to anyone. "Stone said you were hurt, fighting a snatcher. Did your wing heal?"

"It's fine now." She shrugged the joint to demonstrate, but bit her lip as if holding back a wince.

"Let me see."

She turned, and he stepped close to look, lifting her frills and flattened spines out of the way. The heavy joint that attached the folded weight of the wing to her back was lumpy instead of smooth and felt a little too warm, though the scales weren't broken. She must have shifted back to her winged form too soon. He touched the lumpy spot carefully. "It's still swollen along the bone here."

Jade turned her head so he could see her profile. She was looking down, eyes hooded by the edge of the feathery protective membrane that substituted for eyelashes in the shifted form. "It was stupid. I let the thing get too close."

Her voice sounded even, but he sensed the tension in her body, humming through her scales. He had missed Jade with his heart and every other part of him, but it hadn't occurred to him that she might have missed him the same way. And if he stayed where he was a moment more, they might end up wrapped together on the floor, no matter what Celadon and his Arbora chaperones thought.

As attractive as that possibility sounded, he suspected it wouldn't help the situation with Malachite any.

When Jade reached up to touch his hand, he dropped her frills and stepped back. "Were the hunters all right?" His voice came out mostly even.

Jade turned slowly, watching him. "Yes. Frightened, but hopefully they've learned to be more careful." She looked down, still worried. "So... do you like your birthcourt?"

"No. Some of them. I don't know." He didn't mean to say it, but the words came out anyway. "I didn't think you were coming."

Jade didn't seem surprised by that revelation, or angry, or anything that he expected. She sighed, her expression turning unhappy and resigned. "I know. That's why I was so anxious to get here. Before she died, Flower told me you didn't really trust us yet, that you were just... playing along. She said every time we proved to you that you could trust us was important, but that it would take a long time to make a real difference. She said it might be turns before you really saw yourself as one of us."

"I thought I was..." Moon had to stop and clear his throat. It was brutally hard to be honest about this. "I thought I'd gotten better at it." He was starting to realize that maybe he didn't actually know the difference between trusting people and just pretending to trust them while bracing for the betrayal.

Jade smiled a little. "I think you have." She shook her frills, as if shaking off the uncomfortable subject. "We had a plan to steal you. I take it that's not necessary?"

Moon's jaw dropped. "To steal me?"

"Yes. Delin volunteered to help, so it involved sending the flying boat off in one direction to distract them. We meant for Stone to have a part in it too, but I wasn't sure where he was or if he'd managed to

see you.”

Moon couldn't believe she was serious, except apparently she was. “It sounds complicated.”

“Well, I had several days to come up with it, sitting around on the boat. And Chime and Balm made a lot of suggestions. It may have gotten a little out of hand,” she admitted.

“Is that why you sent Stone on ahead?”

“No. I was afraid that if I was too late, you'd give up and leave.”

So she had seen that, too. Moon was torn between relief that he didn't have to conceal it or find a way to tell her, and guilt for feeling it in the first place.

Watching his expression carefully, Jade nodded to herself. “I didn't think another court would understand that you aren't like an ordinary consort. You wouldn't be afraid to just fly away on your own, leave the Reaches behind.” She settled her spines again. “In one way it was a relief. I knew they couldn't treat you too badly, or you'd just leave. But if you did, I had no idea where you'd go, or how I'd find you.”

He took a deep breath. “I thought about it. But I didn't want to give up, just yet.”

“Well, that's good.” Jade's tail moved restlessly, betraying her nerves.

“How are Frost and Thorn and Bitter?” Moon asked, because he wanted to know and it was a less fraught subject. “Did Frost make trouble?” The last time Moon had left for any length of time, Frost had kept the nurseries in chaos with dire predictions.

Jade said, “She did at first, but I told her that another queen had stolen you and I was going to fight her for you, and she was happy with that. Thorn and Bitter seemed to be withholding their approval until I actually brought you back.” She added, “Your birthqueen hasn't met with me yet, but your clutchmate seems reasonable. Have they tried to make you accept another queen?”

“No.” Moon absently scratched the back of his head, still trying to get his mind around the fact that Jade had come up with an elaborate plan to rescue him. “I don't think they've thought that far ahead. They just keep saying they wanted to see me.”

“What a strange thing to say.” Jade mocked him gently.

Moon heard someone rustle outside in the hall, and remembered they didn't have much time. “I need to tell you what's going on here.”

She frowned. "That sounds ominous."

"It is."



They sat down on the furs, and he told her about the crossbreeds, the Fell, and what the ruler in Aventera had said.

Jade listened with growing consternation. "I can't believe your birthqueen kept the crossbreeds. I can't believe she managed to get the court to accept them. She must be... very strong-willed."

Moon agreed. "That's one word for it."

"But if the Fell can hear them..."

"If they can, I don't think it's on purpose." Jade gave him a look, and he said, "I know, but..." He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. "I don't know. The point is, we have to stop the Fell here. If they take Aventera, they'll head into the Reaches."

"Yes, but I can't bring the court into this. There's just not enough of us to fight off another Fell flight, even if we're acting in concert with another court. We can't afford to lose more warriors. We're barely large enough to survive as it is." She made an annoyed gesture. "Please don't repeat that to your clutchmate or your birthqueen. I'm going to have trouble enough getting you back without them thinking they're sending you off to starve."

He hissed in annoyance. "Of course I won't repeat that. And the court won't starve. I can bring in enough game to feed a lot of Raksura." And Ember can't, he didn't add. He didn't want to mention Ember, since Jade hadn't, but the other consort's presence in Indigo Cloud was hanging on him like a weight. There was something else he had to mention, though. "So you still want me back, even though I have half-Fell relatives?"

"It's not your half, that's all that matters." Distracted, Jade tapped her claws on the wooden floor. "I have an idea."

That was a relief. "What?"

She hesitated. "I'd better save it for the meeting with your birthqueen."

Before he could press her to tell him, Balm stepped into the doorway and cleared her throat. She said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's a warrior here who says if you want to speak further to Onyx, you need to go now."

Jade's spines twitched in annoyance. She told Moon, "Better warn

Delin about the Fell.”

Moon agreed, still reluctant, and Jade and Balm left to return to the awkward meeting with Onyx. Moon wondered if Celadon would help Jade or argue against her, or just stay neutral. He still wasn't sure how Celadon felt toward him, or how he felt toward her.

As soon as the queens had gone, Russet and a few other Arbora came in. Russet said, “Would you like something to eat? Or perhaps to rest?”

Moon was beginning to share Stone's opinion of interfering Arbora. He said, “No,” and walked out before they could argue with him.

Moon returned to the colony's main entrance. The flying boat still had an audience, the Arbora sitting on the rocks below it and the warriors clinging to the crags of the ridge or lying on the broad branches of the slanted mountain-tree. Ignoring them, Moon shifted and reached the ship's rail with a couple of bounds.

Chime and the others were still out on deck, and now Delin was with them. As Moon landed and shifted back to his groundling form, Delin came forward eagerly. “So you are well! When we arrived at Indigo Cloud and heard you had been carried off, we were very worried.”

Delin was elderly but had all the determination and stubbornness of his grandson Niran, and that was saying something. His hair, beard, and mustache were silky white, a contrast against gold skin weathered by many long voyages on his family's wind-ships. He had a pad of paper tucked under one arm, with a half-completed sketch of Opal Night's split mountain-tree and the wall and valley. “I'm glad you're here,” Moon said, and was a little surprised to discover how much he meant it. It would be a relief to have someone around who understood about Raksura but wasn't one. “Can we talk somewhere?” Delin also knew a great deal about the Fell from an Islander scholar who had made a study of predators. That particular scholar hadn't survived his obsession with various groundling-eating species, but he had passed along a lot of his knowledge before he died.

Delin eyed him sharply, then motioned for him to follow. “This way.”

As Delin led them across the deck, Chime asked anxiously, “Did you see Jade? What did—Uh, I mean, how did—”

“It's fine.” Moon hoped that was enough of an answer for now. “She's trying to talk to them about getting me back.” He had to add,

“So the plan to steal me is off for now.”

Chime twitched, embarrassed. “Oh, she told you about that.”

“It was a good plan,” Song said from behind them. “It’s almost a shame to give it up.”

Delin took them down the hatch near the deck’s steering cabin, into the ship’s hold. There were multiple chambers down here, and cargo space for storing water jars and food. They went from the passage into a long room the ship’s crew used for eating. There was a low table down the center with stools, and in an attached cubby was a small metal cooking stove carefully insulated from the wooden floor and walls with thin sheets of slate.

Delin chased out two women who were talking at the table and a man who was chopping up root vegetables, then gestured for the Raksura to sit. In Raksuran, he said to Moon, “I have been learning your language, somewhat.” His accent was terrible, but he managed to make the words understandable; Moon was impressed. “But if it is a complicated subject, we should perhaps speak in Altanic.”

“Wait,” Chime said. He jerked his head significantly toward Root. “Is it private? You know what he’s like.”

Root hissed at Chime. “I won’t tell anyone.” He turned to Moon in appeal. “Don’t make me leave! We’ve been wondering what happened to you, and if you were all right, and—”

“Root, you can stay.” The problem was that Chime was right; Root did have a tendency to blurt out whatever was on the top of his mind. And he also had a tendency to say things that were true but that no one particularly wanted said aloud. “Just don’t say anything in front of anyone from Opal Night. I don’t want them to know I told you.”

Root nodded, solemn and serious. “I won’t.”

Song pressed Root’s hand. “Just don’t say anything.”

Moon turned to Delin. “There’s a part of this story that other Raksuran courts can’t know. Will you promise not to tell anyone about it?”

Delin considered this seriously. “What I learn I put into my books. But they are written in the old language of the Golden Isles, and not a trade language. If it is nothing that directly affects my people, I will give my bond not to speak of it to any Raksura, excepting yourselves.”

Moon thought that was good enough. He told the story again, the same way he had told Jade, leaving out any of his personal feelings, or

trying to. When he was finished, Delin looked thoughtful and all the Raksura aghast.

“They kept the crossbreeds?” Horrified, Floret spoke for all of them. “Why? Why would they even...? How could they think...?”

“I don’t know, but they did.” Moon rubbed his eyes wearily. He had eaten with Celadon and the warriors before they left the flying island this morning, and it hadn’t been a particularly tiring flight, but the conversation with Jade had left him emotionally raw.

“And one is even a mentor?” Chime clutched his temples, as if thinking about it hurt his head. “They were raised as Raksura, so they act like Raksura.”

“Would that work?” Song said, incredulous. Root was obeying the injunction not to talk, but was listening intently. Probably committing everything everyone said to memory to remind them of it later.

“Apparently it did.” Chime shook his head.

“But how?” Floret still sounded horrified. “It’s not like you could take a groundling baby and raise it as a Raksura. It couldn’t shift—”

“But it would speak Raksuran,” Moon interrupted, tired of hearing about it, “and it would know what you mean when you flick your spines or move your tails, and know all your stories, and how to act. It would do everything you do except shift. It would be more Raksuran than me.”

“Well, yes, but...” Floret frowned, confused and upset. “Let me think about it.”

Song said, reluctantly, “But it wasn’t a good idea in the end, was it? If the Fell can hear what the crossbreeds think, even if the crossbreeds don’t know about it like you and the daughter queen believe, that’s bad, very bad. We don’t know how much the Fell can find out from them.”

Chime turned to Delin. “What do you think?”

Delin had been lost in thought through the entire conversation. “I wonder where the Fell got the idea to make crossbreeds.”

Chime said, puzzled, “What do you mean?”

Moon said, “Malachite said the Opal Night mentors were trying to find out why the Fell wanted crossbreeds, but there was nothing in the histories about it.”

Delin said, “The one thing we know, that almost everyone knows, about the Fell is that they are parasites. They take everything from

other species. They descend on a city or dwelling place, kill and eat the inhabitants, steal their clothing, their treasures, live in the ruins of their homes, until they grow bored and hungry and move on. They make nothing of their own. No one has ever found any evidence that they even write down their own language, or keep any kind of histories. Perhaps not even oral histories. The scholar Venar-Inram-Alil was a great fool in some ways, but he traveled a long distance to talk to survivors of Fell attacks, and to look at the remains of the places they lived, and he believed they were creatures of the moment, like animals, who thought little or nothing of their past or future.” He spread his hands. “Where would such creatures get so radical a notion, to not only crossbreed with their most deadly enemies, distant relations or not, but to keep the children alive and raise them.” He leaned his elbows on the table. “It doesn’t surprise me that Raksura recaptured the crossbred children and raised them as their own; it astonishes me that Fell thought to create them in the first place.”

Chime nodded slowly. “It’s strange if one Fell flight does it, it’s more strange if two... They could have got the idea from each other, the way they pass knowledge between flights, but that still doesn’t explain where the idea came from in the first place.”

“Maybe they got it from groundlings,” Song said.

As if he couldn’t contain himself a moment longer, Root burst out, “They steal everything else from groundlings, maybe they stole that too!”

“But what groundlings? And why would Fell listen to groundlings?” Floret protested. “That’s crazy. Fell eat each other. They don’t think other species are even people.” She made a helpless gesture. “I would have said they don’t think we’re people, except for how they keep trying to breed with us now.”

Song said, darkly, “Just because they want to breed with us doesn’t mean they think we’re people.”

Everyone stared at her, but Moon felt she had a point. Delin absently tugged at his beard, winding the glossy hair around his fingers. He said, “Chime, you know much of your people’s history. There is nothing in your lore about another species attempting to communicate with the mentors?”

“Not that I know of. And I think I’d remember it if I’d ever run across it in the libraries.” Chime eyed him. “You’re thinking that if some other species is giving the Fell ideas, it tried to do it to us at some point, too?”

“It seems a logical thought.” Delin shrugged, realized he had

more than half his beard wrapped around his fingers, and shook his hand free. "Our records show that after a time when they seemed to be dying out, the Fell have now been growing more and more virulent through the eastern lands and seacoasts, and this matches Stone's recollections. I wonder if they have somehow changed, and these attempts to crossbreed are part of it."

"They've been getting worse, and now they'll come here, to the Reaches," Chime said glumly. "I mean, what else is all this for? They want to make the flights more powerful with crossbreeds and build up their numbers and then start attacking the courts here."

The others twitched uneasily at the thought. "Pearl thinks—" Floret started to say, then shot a glance at Moon that was half guilt and half defiance. Everybody knew Floret was still technically in Pearl's camp, though since Jade and Pearl's arguments had been mostly focused on crops and clutching and drains and the other mundane issues concerning the court, it hadn't mattered as much. Moon made a tired gesture for her to continue. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Delin hastily scribble a note. This trip must have been a jewel mine of Raksuran behavior for Delin's studies.

Floret gave a little shrug, instinctively settling the spines she didn't have in groundling form. She continued, "Pearl thinks the Fell haven't attacked the Reaches in such a long time because they know the only thing all the courts would ever agree on is banding together to kill them. It was different in the east, with the few courts that are there being so spread out, with such separate territories. But the courts here feel all the Reaches belong to Raksura, even if we only hunt our own territories. An attack on one court would seem like an attack on them all."

"She's probably right," Moon said. He couldn't see anything else bringing the Raksuran courts together.

Before Delin could comment, they heard footsteps in the corridor. A young woman ducked her head in and said, "Grandfather? I'm sorry to interrupt, but there are strange Raksura up on the deck who say they want Moon to come back into the colony."

"Why?" Chime demanded before anyone else could. "What do they think we're doing to him?"

Moon set his jaw and didn't growl. He didn't have time for Opal Night's machinations right now. "I'll talk to them."

He left the cabin, the others trailing along behind. The warriors couldn't be here to tell him that Opal Night had agreed to let him return to Indigo Cloud; he would be surprised if Jade had even

managed to meet Malachite yet. As he climbed the stairs to the deck, he was half-expecting to see Rise. But it wasn't her. Five warriors waited there, and he was fairly certain he had seen them with Onyx at the ill-fated dinner.

They were still in their winged forms, four perched on the railing and one female standing on the deck. Something about their attitude made Moon's hackles rise, as if they took a contemptuous but proprietary interest in the flying boat. Like it was a possession they claimed but didn't particularly want. They ignored the Islander crew, who stood at a little distance and watched curiously. Five warriors seemed like overkill for an escort back to a colony which was barely forty paces away.

Moon walked up to the female leader. She was big, with dark copper scales. He was still in groundling form and she and the other warriors didn't shift. That was bad manners at best, a threat at worst. Moon said, "What do you want?"

The warrior said, "You're to come with us." She threw a dismissive glance around the deck, ignoring the hostile Indigo Cloud warriors gathered by the hatch. "Enough playing with the groundlings."

Moon felt a flush of heat, a rage all out of proportion to the stupid remark. He wrestled with the urge to shift and throw all five warriors off the flying boat. He held in a hiss though he thought his jaw might pop from the effort, and managed to say, calmly, "No."

Her spines shivered in surprise. Moon turned away. He got two steps before he sensed her behind him, nearly breathing down his neck. That did it.

Moon whipped around, shifted as he turned, and flared his spines and snapped his wings out. The warrior flinched, so startled she shifted to groundling. She was younger than he expected. He said, with grating emphasis, "I'll go when I'm ready. Now get off the boat."

Two of the male warriors had already fallen off the railing, either in precipitous retreat or pure surprise. The last male and the other female held on, but ducked down to show they were no threat. Behind Moon, he heard Delin ask, "Is it rare for a young consort to threaten warriors?"

"Usually, but it's not rare for him," Song admitted.

The leader took two careful steps back, watching Moon warily, then turned, shifted to her winged form, and jumped over the railing. The other two warriors followed immediately.

Moon forced himself to shift back to groundling, though it took self-control. Delin had already whipped out his sketch book and plopped down on the deck, drawing furiously.

Chime stepped forward, concerned. “Moon, this isn’t doing any good. Jade can get them to give you back, just be patient.”

“I know, I know.” Moon rubbed his temple. He didn’t regret the outburst; it had felt too good. But it probably hadn’t helped the situation any.

“No, Moon did right,” Floret said unexpectedly. “They should have asked politely, and they knew it. He can’t let warriors order him around like that, especially in a new court.” She tugged on Chime’s arm. “Come on, let him calm down.”

Chime went, reluctantly, and everyone on the deck tried to look as if they had something to do. Moon sat on his heels next to Delin to watch him sketch, and tried to settle his simmering anger. Floret was right. Opal Night—at least the part under Onyx’s influence—wanted him to act like a consort but didn’t want to treat him like one.

After a time, Delin’s frantic scribbles slowed, as he captured enough of the scene to preserve the memory. He turned the book sideways and started to make notes along the margins. He asked, “They treat you badly here?”

“No.” So far, Moon figured he had done a good job of giving back whatever he had gotten.

“But it is not your home.”

“No.”

Delin looked up. “I do not understand how they can take a man away from his wife when he does not wish to be parted from her. Especially when his wife has such big teeth and claws.”

Moon sighed and got to his feet. He had stalled long enough to make his point; it was time to face the consequences. “My birthqueen has bigger teeth and claws.”

“More intimidating than Indigo Cloud’s Pearl?” At Moon’s nod, Delin lifted his brows, impressed.

The others had taken seats on the deck a short distance away. They stood as Moon walked over to say goodbye. “Will you be all right?” Chime asked, still worried. “Maybe they’ll ask us in to eat with the court and we can see you later.”

Eating with this court was more of a punishment than a treat. “Maybe,” Moon said, trying not to sound as grim as he felt. He had to

answer several more inquiries about his health and wellbeing before he could shift and jump over the railing.

There were still Arbora and warriors in the greeting hall who politely scrambled to get out of his way, then watched him pass. He heard them murmuring to each other as soon as he turned into the passage. Anyone who had climbed or flown up the outside of the tree for a better look at the flying ship would have had a clear view of the scene with the warriors. Moon hoped they had enjoyed it.

“Moon!”

He turned to see Rise hurrying to catch up with him. She said, “I saw what happened. I’m sorry.”

She was in her groundling form, so Moon shifted too, using the moment to compose himself. “It wasn’t your fault. Is Jade still talking to Onyx?”

“Yes. That’s why Onyx sent warriors after you.” Rise’s expression was caught between annoyance and amusement. “She implied Jade meant to use that flying craft to steal you away.”

Moon managed a noncommittal shrug. He hoped no one said anything about the discarded plan. “Flying boats aren’t very fast.”

Rise hesitated, then said, “Malachite wants to talk to you.”

That was a good sign. Either it was about Jade or what they had discovered at Aventera, or both. Moon hoped for both. Then he heard a commotion from outside the greeting hall. Rise frowned and called out, “What is it?”

One of the Arbora answered, “The Indigo Cloud line-grandfather is back!”

Moon started for the doorway. “That’s not good.”

Rise followed. “I thought he came back with you and Celadon.”

“No, he stayed to scout the country around Aventera, to look for the Fell.” If Stone had returned this soon, he must have found something.

Moon went out onto the landing platform to see Stone banking in. The warriors and Arbora scattered as Stone cupped his wings and dropped down. Rise moved back a few paces, but Moon stayed where he was, swaying a little from the rush of air from Stone’s wings.

Stone shifted down to his groundling form, head turned toward the flying ship. Chime, Floret, and Song stood at the railing. Root perched on top of the steering cabin, waving. Irritated, Stone said,

“Whose idea was that?”

“Jade’s,” Moon told him. “Did you find something?”

“She’s here? Good.” Stone looked grim. “I found the Fell.”

Chapter Twelve

Rise rushed to tell Malachite, then returned with word that the queen would speak to them in the queens' greeting chamber. Jade, Balm, and Celadon were already there, with Onyx and her daughter queens. Lithe, a scatter of older warriors, and more Arbora arrived to represent Opal Night's other mentors and the teacher, hunter, and soldier castes. They all stayed in their groundling forms, though the queens kept their wings instead of shifting to Arbora.

Stone settled himself on a cushion near the hearth at the center of the room and ignored all attempts to imply he should move to a less prominent spot. Moon sat near Stone, and Jade and Balm diplomatically took a position between Onyx's supporters and the Arbora.

Then one of Onyx's daughter queens said, "Should the visitors be here?" She regarded Jade and Balm, her expression critical and faintly suspicious. She inclined her head toward Moon. "And surely this is no place for a young, unattached consort."

There was a murmur of agreement from Onyx's warriors. Onyx herself just lazily coiled her tail and didn't deign to comment.

Moon hissed under his breath. He wasn't leaving.

Jade smiled and showed the tips of her fangs. "He isn't unattached. As you can scent for yourself."

With an edge to her voice, the daughter queen said, "Your claim is still in dispute."

Jade tilted her head. "Not to me."

There was a rush of wings from the passage and Malachite suddenly stood in the doorway. Everyone went quiet as she stepped into the room. She sat down, and said, "Line-grandfather. Tell us what you saw."

Celadon sat forward and said quickly, "Malachite. Before we talk, Lithe should go."

Lithe stared at her, startled. "Me? Why?"

She must be the only crossbreed in the room. Moon looked around at the other Arbora and saw they were all well past maturity.

If any were survivors of the eastern colony, they were old enough to have been born before the Fell attack.

Malachite didn't hesitate. "We will speak of it later." Her voice softened a trace. "For now, Lithe, go."

Confused, Lithe glanced at the other Arbora. They looked worried but didn't object. She got to her feet and walked out of the chamber.

Malachite flicked her claws for Stone to continue. He said, "I was scouting the plains past the far edge of the groundling city's plateau late this morning, and caught a strong scent of Fell, coming from the southeast. I went downwind, using the clouds as cover, and followed it. After a time, I saw..." Stone hesitated, as if he was having trouble finding the words. Moon felt his skin start to creep. "Several major kethel, carrying something."

"Sacs?" Malachite asked.

The sacs were structures made of secretions from the major kethel, who used them to transport large numbers of dakti. The dakti were the smallest of the Fell and the slowest flyers, and carrying them in sacs made the flights able to travel much faster. It was disgusting, but it was nothing unusual for Fell. But there was something in Stone's expression that told Moon there was more to this than that.

Stone said, "No, one sac. A huge one. Bigger than all the kethel together. Big enough to hold hundreds—more than hundreds—of dakti." He shook his head slightly. "That flying island we stayed on last night? You could fit a few of those inside it with room to spare."

Moon just stared, incredulous. How... What... He forced himself not to interrupt. The room had gone still, and no one so much as twitched a spine as they listened intently.

Stone continued, "They were carrying it with a web, like the boats with the air bladders in the city. Something like that." He growled in sharp annoyance and all the warriors in the room flinched. "It's hard to describe."

One of the female Arbora stood and moved to sit next to Stone. The Arbora flipped through a roll of paper to a blank page, and began to sketch rapidly with a charcoal stick. "Like this?"

"No, on top. It was bigger." After a few moments, Stone tapped the paper. "That's—Yes, like that."

The Arbora turned the paper around and held it up so they could all see. Everyone leaned forward, and some of those in the back moved so they could get a better view. It was a rough drawing of a sac, the size of it apparent when you knew the flying creatures

arrayed above it were meant to be major kethel. The bulky sac was suspended below them, slung in a web-like netting.

After a moment, everyone sat back, and the Arbora lowered the drawing. Moon caught Jade's eye; her expression was bleak.

"But..." Celadon looked to Malachite, uncertain. "What could be inside it? Dakti and rulers?"

Stone gave her a grim nod. "Lots of dakti and rulers. That's my guess."

Malachite asked Stone, "The Fell didn't scent you?"

"I didn't wait around," Stone told her. "I don't know if they mean to come here, or if they're heading toward the groundlings." He added, "Probably both."

It was Onyx who said, "We are well-prepared for an attack." She glanced at Malachite, irony coloring her voice. "We have thought of little else for the last forty turns."

Preoccupied, Malachite said, "We will destroy the Fell." She spoke as if it was an afterthought, as if her attention was on something else, but there was nothing but complete conviction in her voice. A ripple of suppressed tension moved through the warriors, and there were growls of agreement from the Arbora. Apparently the only thing this court agreed on was killing the Fell. Moon felt himself caught in the rush of emotion, a growl building in his own chest.

Onyx said to Malachite, "I hate to admit that you've been right all this time, but Lithe's auguries do seem to be falling into place."

One of the oldest Arbora, a male with graying hair and skin, said, "This must be an attack on all the Reaches. The Fell have never come to this territory before, not in all the hundreds of turns this mountain-tree has been here."

"I have a suggestion," Jade said. She tapped her claws thoughtfully against the polished floor.

Malachite said nothing, just watched her. With annoyance, Onyx made the formal introduction. "Malachite of Opal Night, Jade of Indigo Cloud, who has come here to beg a consort from us."

Jade flicked a spine at that description. Malachite said, "Well?"

"Your colony is in danger from the Fell. You should allow my consort to return to Indigo Cloud with me, out of danger. You owe this to him."

Moon stared. "That was your idea?"

Jade didn't look at him. Moon hissed. He didn't want to run from the Fell, not now. He knew he shouldn't argue this here, but he couldn't help himself. "This isn't what we talked about."

Jade's jaw set, but she ignored him. She said to Malachite, "You would also gain an alliance with Indigo Cloud."

Onyx's tail lashed. "From what Emerald Twilight reported, an alliance with your court is nothing to covet," she said. "And consorts are not trade goods."

It's nice that somebody thinks so. Moon growled under his breath, exasperated.

Jade's spines trembled as she tried to suppress strong emotion. "If they aren't trade goods," she said, her voice harsh, "then they shouldn't be taken from their queens and dragged off to a strange court on a whim."

Celadon drew an angry breath to respond but Malachite's voice overrode hers. She said, "A whim."

The cold fury buried in those two words made Moon's breath catch in his throat.

Jade's spines bristled in reflex. She said, deliberately, "Your reasons may have held weight for you, but to me, and to others in my court, it seemed a cruel impulse."

Malachite's spines flared. Moon quelled an instinctive urge to bolt for the doorway. Celadon winced, the other daughter queens twitched and Onyx hissed in reflex, then self-consciously settled her spines. The Arbora uneasily edged away. Stone was the only one in the room who didn't flinch. Jade didn't let her spines rise in threat, but she didn't back down, either.

Malachite said, "You took him knowing he belonged to another court."

Jade countered, "I thought his court was destroyed."

Moon couldn't believe they were going to rehash this. He had really thought he had gotten Malachite past this point. "I thought we agreed that was my fault."

"We did not agree." Malachite's gaze didn't leave Jade. She said, "You had no right to take him, the last consort of my bloodline. You knew he was no feral solitary, and you must have known what he was worth. Even if he wasn't forced, he knew nothing of his own people. He had no idea what he was agreeing to."

Moon drew breath to argue that, but Stone squeezed his wrist,

telling him to be silent. If Stone had hit him or told him to shut up, it wouldn't have stopped him. But something about that gesture, and Stone's wary, closed expression, kept Moon silent.

And he remembered that night in the turning city, when Jade said that he couldn't possibly come from a bad bloodline.

Jade hissed out a breath. "I didn't—"

"Tell me I'm wrong." Malachite's voice might have been made of iron. "Tell me he thought it meant more than trading himself for shelter and companionship."

"I explained what it meant—"

"And did you think he understood?"

Silence stretched painfully. Then Jade said, "No."

Moon wished he had bolted from the room when he had a chance. All he wanted to say was "Understand what?" Then he saw Balm's expression. She was seated behind Jade, biting her lip, looking down at her hands tightly folded in her lap. Guilt was written over her whole body.

Jade tried to keep her voice hard, as if it was a struggle not to sound defensive. She said, "But I did believe that his court was destroyed. I had no reason to think otherwise."

Malachite pressed harder. "You knew you were returning to the Reaches, where another court would recognize his bloodline. You knew there was a strong chance a court might claim him, and you needed alliances. So you took him."

Jade showed her teeth. "I took him because I wanted him for my consort."

"Then why haven't you had a clutch?"

Moon heard Stone hiss an under-the-breath curse.

Jade's spines trembled and her jaw set, the blood drained from her lips so the blue was almost white. She didn't answer.

In a quiet voice, Celadon said, "We can't afford to argue like this, not now. We have to deal with the Fell first." She told Jade, "If you aren't going to help us, then take your warriors and go back to your court."

Jade stood. Balm looked up with a start, eyes wide. Jade said, "I'm not leaving without my consort. This is not over." She left the chamber, her pace deliberate, as Balm got to her feet and followed.

For a long, painful moment no one moved, no one spoke. Moon

started to stand and realized his muscles had tensed to the point that his legs had cramped. He managed to get to his feet without stumbling and walked out. No one tried to call him back.

He took the passage that led to the consort's hall, stopped in a junction where one corridor opened out toward the central well. He took a deep breath of the fresh damp air flowing down it.

Feet pattered on the smooth wooden floor of the passage; Lithe hurried toward him. She stopped, her bracelets and the beads in her hair jangling with her agitation. "Moon, why did they ask me to leave?"

She was bound to hear it sooner or later. His voice was thick and he had to clear his throat. "The Fell know that there are crossbreeds here in the court. We think they can hear your thoughts."

Lithe fell back a step, appalled. "No! That's not possible. I'm a mentor, I'd know!"

"I don't know. Someone will have to figure it out."

Lithe studied him, her expression turning uncertain. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." He turned and went on toward the consorts' hall, and she didn't try to follow.

For once, there were no Arbora hanging around in the main room, which was a relief. Moon went through and up to his bower. He sat on the fur next to the bowl hearth, close enough to feel the faint warmth of the stones.

After a while, Stone came in and sat down nearby. He didn't speak, he just looked at Moon.

Moon felt obligated to say something. "I never fooled myself about why I was in Indigo Cloud. You took a chance on me, and it worked, mostly. But I didn't need to hear it spelled out like that."

Stone growled in his throat, got up, and walked out.

Moon watched him go, too startled to react. That wasn't helpful, he thought.

He realized his throat was dry and drank the tea that someone had left sitting beside the hearth. It was cold and bitter and all he wanted to do was wash it out of his mouth. He went into the bathing room to get a drink from the cool water running down the channel in the wall. It felt so good, he stepped under it and stood there until his head cleared. Stepping out of the pool, he stripped off his wet clothes and changed into the spare ones in his pack. They seemed much

cleaner than he remembered, so he suspected the Arbora had been in here, too.

Moon came out of the bathing room and heard soft footsteps on the stairs. He froze, his heart giving an anticipatory thump. But it was Russet who appeared in the doorway. She was alone for once, without her entourage of younger Arbora.

Moon wasn't glad to see her. He had felt an instant connection with Feather, but Russet just seemed like a nosy stranger. He said, "Unless it's about the Fell, I don't want to talk to anyone right now."

But she asked, "Do you remember me? From before, from the old colony."

"No. I didn't remember anyone here." Her expression didn't give away anything, but he felt like he might be insulting her. He added, "When Feather was telling me what happened, I thought I remembered it, just for an instant, but it went away."

Her lips pressed together. Then she went to the other side of the bowl hearth and crouched down to collect the used tea cups. Guilt made Moon ask, "Did you take care of me?"

Her brow furrowed as she studied a cup. "No. I was in the nurseries, but it was Feather and Yarrow and Twist who took care of the royal clutch."

So many of the Arbora must have lost their own children. "Who did you lose?"

She looked away, and now her expression was angry and bitter. "Everyone."

There was a faint rustle from outside the door as someone tried to make their presence known before they approached. A moment later an older male warrior stepped in. He radiated awkwardness and discomfort, so Moon assumed he hadn't come to attack anybody. The warrior nodded to Russet, then faced Moon and said, "Umber asks that you come to the consorts' hall. The other consorts' hall. He wants to speak with you."

Moon might have refused, but it would provide a quick exit from Russet's uneasy company. He got to his feet and said, "Let's go."



The other consorts' hall was larger, made up of several interconnected chambers with passages branching off to lead to the bowers. Small balconies, some draped with climbing vines, looked down from the upper part of the room. The carving went up the walls

in waves, shapes that were meant to symbolize the wind, with Aeriats in flight flowing along the ceilings.

The warrior took Moon through the main living chambers, past the curious eyes of several young consorts, up a curving stair to a smaller sitting area halfway up the wall. It looked down on the room below, and had an opening into the central well, with a view of the waterfall. The space was floored with cushions and seating mats in rich materials. Umber waited there in his groundling form, wearing a dark robe woven with intricate patterns.

Moon sat across from him. Another young consort immediately brought tea and a plate of flatbread, sliced meat, and fruit.

Umber said, "I was told about what happened in the council. Even after all these turns, Malachite is still... enraged at the Fell attack."

Moon took a drink of tea to give himself a chance to think of an answer that wouldn't get him kicked out of the hall. He just said, "I noticed."

Umber wasn't fooled. "I don't think you realize that she does prize you greatly. You were part of her last clutch, and Celadon is the only other survivor. She hasn't taken another consort since returning from the east."

"She doesn't know me."

Umber smiled. "She carried you in her body. She knows everything she needs to know."

Moon didn't have an answer for that one.

Umber regarded him thoughtfully. "Onyx wants me to ask if you would consider accepting a queen from our bloodline. Her name is Ivory. She has a warrior clutchmate named Saffron, who was sent to retrieve you from the groundlings. When you threw her off the ship, Ivory was greatly intrigued."

"I didn't throw her off." If Moon had thrown her off the boat, Saffron wouldn't be in any condition to gossip about it to her royal clutchmate.

"As you say." Umber made it clear he wasn't going to argue the wording. "Ivory said that she would agree to take you if asked, and to overlook the fact that you had already been taken by another queen. The bloodlines are close, but not unacceptably so."

Moon considered Umber. The older consort didn't seem particularly interested in the proposal he had just relayed. "And what

do you think?"

"I think she's too young and foolish for you," Umber said frankly. "She would see you as a challenge. You would see her as an enemy. It would be a disaster."

It sounded like a disaster. Moon said, "Then my answer is no."

"I'll tell Onyx." Umber poured more tea.

So that was that, apparently. Moon said, "I thought the idea was that I'd be sent to a queen in another court for an alliance."

"Opal Night has all the alliances it needs. And I know Malachite would prefer you to stay here."

"I didn't think I was welcome in this court." Moon cast a significant glance down at the young consorts who gathered around the hearth in the chamber below. The ones caught staring up at Moon and Umber all self-consciously looked away.

Umber followed Moon's gaze. With an ironic air, he said, "They've heard by now how important you are to Malachite. I doubt they'll treat you as an interloper again." He added, "Because Ivory is inappropriate doesn't mean there isn't a daughter queen in our court for you."

Until that instant Moon hadn't been aware that he had been trying to make a decision. "Maybe. But I'm already taken." And he thought, So it wasn't that difficult a decision after all.



After Moon left Umber, he went to the colony's main entrance. Twilight was falling into a cool evening, the sky's blue darkening to indigo and the first stars coming out. Lights glowed on either side of the big doorway, echoed by the flicker of lamps aboard Delin's ship. Warriors still gathered around the entrance hall, but no one tried to stop Moon when he went outside.

Moon shifted just long enough to make the long leap up to the ship. He hit the railing a little too hard and the wood vibrated. A couple of sailors on watch stood up in alarm, then relaxed as soon as Moon swung down onto the deck and shifted to groundling. One lifted a hand in greeting, and called out in Altanic, "The others are below!"

Moon waved back and went to the hatchway to take the steps down. Still trying to think what he was going to say to Jade, he was caught by surprise when he stepped into the corridor and she whipped out of a doorway.

She froze in surprise. "Oh. I thought it was one of their warriors.

With a message.”

“No. It’s me.” They stared at each other for a moment.

Delin appeared in the doorway Jade had just burst out of, lifted his brows, then stepped back in and slid the door shut. Moon heard the other Raksura demanding to know who was here, then frantic shushing.

Jade twitched her spines nervously, then turned down the corridor. “We can talk back here.”

She led him down the passage to a large cabin. From the belongings strewn about and the blankets heaped up in the corners, Moon guessed this was where the Raksura had been sleeping on the journey.

Jade pulled a folded blanket around for him to sit on, then took one for herself. As soon as they were both seated, Jade said, “I’m sorry. That didn’t work out at all like I expected. And it didn’t say much for my ability to negotiate with other courts.”

Moon shook his head a little. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.” Jade hesitated. “I don’t want you to feel as if... I told Malachite the truth. I took you for a consort because I wanted you. Not because it was the only option, or because I thought there might be a future alliance.”

“It was the only option,” Moon reminded her. “The Arbora wouldn’t agree to leave the old colony unless you had a consort. That was the whole reason Stone went to look for one.”

“Not once the Fell attacked. If any of the Arbora had demanded to stay at the old colony after that, Pearl would have been happy to leave them there.”

That didn’t seem like much of an option, and he didn’t think Pearl, let alone Jade, would have been willing to risk it. “So I was the first consort you’d ever seen that you weren’t related to. It doesn’t matter,” he said, when she drew breath to object. “It’s all right.”

“It’s not all right.” She bared her teeth. “If I could prove it to you, I would.”

Moon rubbed his eyes. A clutch would prove it, but Jade was obviously unwilling to admit that he couldn’t provide one. “You don’t have to prove it.”

“I could steal you.”

He started to say that wasn’t funny anymore, but her expression

stopped the words. The last time he had seen that look in her eyes, he had had to talk her out of killing Tempest's sister Halcyon. He said, "You can't steal me. Not from Malachite."

With complete conviction, she said, "I can."

It was tempting, but they just didn't have time for it. Moon made his voice hard. "The Fell are about to attack the Reaches. If you try to steal me in the middle of this, I will make sure you never sleep again."

Jade's eyes narrowed. "I have help."

"Who, the warriors?" Moon snorted in derision. "That's funny."

Jade held his gaze for a long moment, a growl in her throat. Then her shoulders and spines relaxed in defeat and she looked away.

"Well. What do you want to do?"

"It's nice to be asked, for once." And it would be easier to answer if he had any idea what he should do. "I can't leave here until the Fell flight is dead."

"I can offer to help fight them in exchange for you." Jade propped her chin on her hand, and her expression turned ironic. "That should go over well. I think your birthqueen hates me only slightly less than the Fell who attacked your court in the first place."

Moon would have argued that, except it might well be true. "It's hard to tell with her."

"It wasn't that hard to tell." Jade's expression went from ironic to sour. "Stone is furious with me."

"Are you sure? Maybe he was just furious in general."

"No, he was furious in particular." Jade seemed glumly certain of it. "He didn't like how I handled the whole thing. It's made me realize I don't know as much about being a queen as I think I do."

He remembered again that Jade was young, maybe even younger than he was. It had always been hard for him to judge Raksuran age, especially since number of turns lived didn't always equal maturity. But that was true for groundlings, too. "I think you know a lot about being a queen, it's just..." He rubbed his forehead, trying to massage away an incipient headache. It had been a long and very tense day. "Not helpful in this situation. Where's Stone now?"

"He went off to sulk." She watched him worriedly. "Did you eat today? Did you stop eating again?"

"I did not stop eating," he said, irritated. "I flew most of today, I'm tired."

“Yes, but...” Jade didn’t finish. She took his arm and pulled him to his feet. “Let’s get you something anyway.”

She led him down the passage to the ship’s common room and slid the door open. Delin, Chime, Balm, Floret, Root, and Song all sat around the low table, and the conversation stopped abruptly when Moon and Jade appeared. There were dishes on the table, and from the bones stacked on a platter, they had been eating a fresh kill. It wasn’t surprising, since Delin was one of the few groundlings who wouldn’t be disturbed by watching Raksura eat raw meat, but the sight made Moon queasy and his stomach twinged in a painful way that wasn’t hunger. Great, you did make yourself sick again, he thought. He wasn’t certain how, since he had eaten with Celadon, Stone, and the warriors just this morning.

Everyone watched them worriedly, and Chime said, “Everything all right?”

“Yes.” Moon took a seat next to him, and picked up the nearest cup to see what was in it.

Balm passed him a carafe of water. “We were talking about the groundling city, and what we can do.”

Delin said, “I’ve been thinking about these Aventerans, their refusal to see the danger. If I spoke to them, perhaps it would help.”

Moon asked, “You think they’d believe another groundling when they didn’t believe us?”

“Perhaps. And, from what you described, I’m not entirely sure that they didn’t believe you.” Delin shrugged. “They may not have wanted to appear any more vulnerable than they already were.”

“Maybe.” As much as Moon didn’t like the Aventerans, it would be a relief to know they were prepared for the Fell. “If we go there, don’t tell them how your flying boat works.”

Delin lifted his brows. “You think they will attempt to steal our sustainer?”

“No. Maybe.” Moon rubbed his temple. There was a tight pain across his forehead. “I just don’t think you should trust them.”

“Moon, are you all right?” Chime’s voice was oddly sharp. “You don’t look well.”

“He’s right, Moon.” Jade touched his face. “Your skin is turning gray.”

“No, I’m tired...” he started to say, and thought, and weak, and too warm, and... “I think I’m sick.”

It came on just like it had before. A dark wave of dizziness and nausea flowed over him and he was suddenly stretched out on the floor. Balm held his head while Jade leaned over him. Her voice hard with tension, Jade said, “Chime, what kind of sickness is this?”

Chime put his ear to Moon’s chest. “His lungs are clear.” He put a hand on Moon’s stomach, and Moon reflexively snarled and knocked it away before he even realized how much it hurt.

“Moon, look at me!” Chime’s voice snapped.

Moon blinked and focused on him. Chime peered at him closely, then laid a hand on his neck. “He’s too cold.”

“He’s been ill,” Jade said. “When Stone first got here—”

Delin said, “He was fine moments ago. Chime, do your people get ill this quickly?”

“No, no, they don’t. If it’s a sickness, it’s a bad one.”

“What you mean ‘if?’” Floret said. “Look at him!”

“He may be poisoned.” Delin took Moon firmly by the chin, making sure he had his attention. “You need to vomit. You understand?”

“Poisoned?” That was Balm, sounding incredulous. “How would he get poisoned?”

Somewhere in the back, Root said, “I didn’t know we could get poisoned. Except the Fell poison.”

“This isn’t Fell poison,” Song told him impatiently.

“I know that, I’m just saying—”

Jade snapped, “Shut up, all of you, except Delin and Chime!”

“Get a bucket!” Delin yelled at someone. “If it’s poison, this may help. If it’s sickness, it won’t hurt.”

“He’s right.” Chime grabbed hold of Moon’s arm and hauled him upright. An Islander crewman hurried over, plunking down a woven reed bucket.

Moon decided to side with Delin and Chime, but he wanted to take care of the matter without any help. He shook off Chime, warned the others away with a growl, and grabbed the bucket. He had to stick his finger down his throat, but he managed it. Coughing and choking afterward, he knew Delin was right. What had been in his stomach was far too bitter and acidic.

When he had got rid of all he could, he slumped sideways. Jade

caught him and eased him down to the deck. Moon curled on his side, the wood cool against his cheek. He wasn't sure he felt better. Chime and Delin snatched the bucket together and both sniffed at the contents. Chime shook his head, and Delin looked puzzled.

"Get water!" Someone called out.

"No, not water," Chime said. "Something thick."

"Get a bottle of atra," Delin told one of the hovering crew members. He explained to the others, "It's a plant milk, with opposite properties to that of acidic substances."

"You think this is a—" Chime hesitated. "I don't know the word in Altanic. Like a venom?"

"Possibly."

An Islander appeared with a light ceramic bottle. Jade helped Moon sit up and held it steady for him, as Delin instructed, "Drink only a little."

Moon tasted it cautiously. It was milky but with a faint sweetness underneath. He remembered the simple Lithe had made had been thick and milky, and that it had helped, so he drank a few swallows. At first it felt like it was going to come right back up, but then the cramps eased.

Jade said, "We need a mentor. Balm, go into the colony and—"

"No." Moon's voice sounded rough and weak. He knew Delin's remedy might be temporary, and he had to know who had done this. "I need to go back inside. To the bower, where I was staying."

Chapter Thirteen

Jade carried Moon back to the colony and up through the passages to the consorts' hall, but Moon was barely aware of it. The world had narrowed down to the pain in his gut and the effort it took to draw breath.

Awareness returned when Moon felt someone lay the back of a warm scaled hand against his forehead. He knew it was Malachite, not Jade or Celadon. He didn't know how he knew, he just did.

He opened bleary eyes and saw the carved ceiling of his bower. People looked down at him from all around, Jade at one side, Chime and Delin at the other. Past them he saw Lithe and two older Arbora who might be mentors. He hoped they were mentors. He heard Celadon speak quietly to someone. Everyone looked worried. He closed his eyes again and tried to remember why he had wanted to be brought back here.

He heard Jade ask, "What kind of simple did you give him before?" Her voice was rough.

Lithe answered, "It's for calming the stomach, for people who get so ill they can't eat." She sounded desperate. "But if this is really a poison, that simple won't work."

"It worked before," Celadon said, sounding as if she were fighting to keep a tight hold on her frustration. "Can't you try it again?"

"She can try it," Delin said, his voice soft and patient as he carefully pronounced the words in Raksuran. "But we already gave him a plant milk, which has a similar purpose, and it hasn't truly helped. Whoever did this must have found out that her remedy countered it, and increased the amount greatly."

One of the other Arbora said, "The groundling scholar is right. We have to find out what it is before we can treat it."

"Will a healing sleep help?" Jade said. Moon had been wondering that himself.

It was Chime who answered her this time, and he sounded frightened and miserable. "Not for poison."

Moon didn't find any of this very encouraging.

A sudden commotion at the door caused everyone except the queens and Delin to scramble away. Stone stepped into view, picked up Delin by the shoulders and set him aside, and took his place beside Moon. Delin moved to a vantage point near Moon's feet, and said, "We believe he has been poisoned, but we aren't sure how, or with what."

Poisoned, Moon thought. Now he remembered.

Rise's voice came from the other side of the room. "Umber invited him to his consorts' hall. They would have had tea, and probably food. But how could that be poisoned?"

"Because someone put poison in it," Jade snarled. "This was no accident."

"Would one of the younger consorts do this out of jealousy?" Celadon asked, but she didn't sound as if she thought it was very likely. "Someone go to Umber, make sure he and the others are well."

As a warrior pushed through the onlookers and out of the room, Lithe said, "But how would they think of it? And what would they use?"

Another Arbora said, "No one's ever done anything like this here, not as long as I can remember. Raksura don't poison each other!"

Moon wrapped his hand around Stone's wrist. Moving was a huge effort, but talking was worse. He croaked out, "Check the tea in the pot."

Stone's gaze snapped to the hearth, then he looked around the room. "There's no pot here."

"There was earlier." Moon was certain now. "It was bitter." He forced more words out past the pain in his throat. "It's the only thing I had to eat or drink here today that I didn't share with someone."

Stone stared at Moon, realization hardening his expression. "The morning after you were sick the first time. The tea the Arbora left here smelled wrong, so I didn't use it. I thought it had gone bad."

Jade hissed in fury. "Who removed the pot?"

"It must have been the Arbora who were watching him." Celadon's voice held a suppressed growl. "Find them."

Pain seized Moon's stomach again, not a stabbing sensation but a burning one, extending out through his arms and legs, as if tracing the path the poison took through his body. For a time he wasn't aware of anything else, then someone wiped his face with a cool damp cloth, and made him drink something that tasted pungent and milky. It was

like the simple Lithe had given him before, and it eased the pain a little. Then he heard more people enter the room, and voices raised in argument.

He heard Russet say, "It was Moss who tended the bowers today."

A young male voice answered, sounding confused and taken aback. "No, I did it before they left with Celadon for the groundling city. I was working in the gardens today. You were the only one who came up here."

Russet was calm. "No, you're mistaken. I wasn't up here. You were the only one in the hall."

"I'm not mistaken," Moss said, his voice trembling. "I – I—"

"Moss is twenty turns old and barely out of the nurseries." Celadon cut through the voices raised in protest. "What reason does he have to poison a consort he has never met?"

"What reason does Russet have?" someone countered. "She helped take care of the royal clutches in the nurseries, with Feather and Yarrow, when the Fell attacked."

Her voice grating with the effort not to growl, Jade said, "So the boy Moss has never met Moon before, but Russet has."

"And she's met the Fell," Chime said, grimly. "Why else would someone do this, unless they were influenced by the Fell?"

Still sounding far too calm, Russet said, "Lithe was the one who gave him a simple."

Moon managed to get his eyes open. He couldn't see Russet, who must be standing toward the front of the room. Jade still sat next to him, her claws clenched and her spines raised in impotent fury. Celadon stood just past her, facing the group of Arbora. Her spines shivered and her shoulder muscles bunched, and with a clarity born of the near-death experience he was having, Moon read frustration and a slowly growing, incredulous rage in her body language. Celadon said, "That was two days ago, and Lithe wasn't born when the Fell attacked. Obviously." The last word grated like claws on rock.

Stone tilted his head in a way that suggested his patience was about to violently snap. His growl made the floor vibrate as he said, "And I tasted that simple. It was herbs and plant milk, that was all."

Incredibly, Russet sounded unmoved. "Herbs can be poisonous."

Jade hissed and surged to her feet. Balm lunged forward and caught her arm.

As Jade wrenched free, Celadon snapped, "Stop!" Jade hesitated, threw a desperate look down at Moon, then stepped back. Balm hissed in relief.

Celadon turned again to the Arbora. "One of the other mentors will look into the minds of Russet and Moss and Lithe, and settle this."

Still as cool as if Moon wasn't dying here in the middle of the room, Russet said, "No. I refuse. Why does everyone doubt me?"

Lithe snarled, "I'll let a mentor—any mentor—look into my mind. I have nothing to hide. What about you, Moss?"

"Me, too." Moss's voice trembled, but more with anger than fear. "I don't have anything to hide."

Russet said again, "I refuse."

Moon had to see her. He tried to get his arms to move, to lever himself up, but he felt as if there were rocks piled on his chest. Stone slid an arm under him and pulled him up into a sitting position. He blinked sweat out of his eyes and focused on Russet.

She stood alone against the wall of the bower. The other Arbora had stepped away from her, staring in a mix of bewilderment and growing consternation. Moon gasped, "I know it was you."

Russet focused on him, and her expression abruptly went from calmly neutral to wildly furious. "I knew you were lying when you said you didn't remember."

Jade surged forward again, slamming into Celadon's shoulder. "What did you give him?"

Lithe stepped toward Russet, her fists knotted. "Tell us! What did you give him?" Russet just stared at her. Lithe bared her teeth, unexpectedly fierce. "I can make you tell me."

Moon felt Stone tense, felt something in the room change behind him, as if a predator had hidden nearby and had suddenly revealed itself for the kill. He looked around just as Malachite uncoiled like a snake and stood. He had forgotten she was in the room, or she had made him forget. From the shocked silence of the others, he wasn't the only one.

The warriors and Arbora shrunk away, leaving a clear path to Russet. Russet's breath caught in her throat and she pressed herself against the wall. Malachite stepped around Moon and Stone, almost delicately. Her partially extended claws clicked against the smooth wood of the floor, the only sound in the room. She moved deliberately toward Russet until she stood barely a pace away.

It was Russet's turn to tremble, but she couldn't seem to move, couldn't look away. Malachite's tail made one slow, almost languid lash. Moon's skin went cold, a chill that cut right through the rising heat in his body, as if Malachite had just done something that had drawn all the warmth out of the room.

Malachite said, softly, "What did you put in the tea?"

Eyes wide with terror, Russet whispered, "The hunters killed a tree-asp and brought it back to the larder. There was venom still in the sacs. The first time I tried I didn't use enough—" She stopped abruptly as two of the mentors jumped up and shoved their way through the other Arbora and ran out of the bower.

Lithe turned away, dumped her satchel to scramble through the various packets of herbs. She muttered, "I think we can... There's an antidote but we have to..."

Moon rolled over and curled into Stone's lap. He didn't want to hear anymore. Stone patted him on the back and Moon concentrated on listening to Stone's heartbeat and the deep growl vibrating through his chest.

He growled himself when Stone lifted him up. He blinked away pain tears to see the two mentors who had run out were back, huddling with Lithe over a multi-colored concoction in a bowl. It steamed a little in the damp air. They were the only ones here; everyone else had left the bower.

Lithe dipped a cup into the liquid and handed it to Stone, who put it into Moon's hands and helped him lift it to his lips. The scent that rose from it was like rot, like the simple had been cooked in the body of a dead grasseater, but Moon had just enough sense left to force it down anyway. He gagged once but managed to swallow most of it. Once it was in his throat, it felt cool and smooth, as if he was drinking very fine silk. It soothed his abraded throat, and the sensation continued down into his stomach, the relief so intense he sank back into Stone's lap and folded up like a sleeping fledgling. He heard Stone ask, "Another dose?"

"No," Lithe replied. "Too much could hurt him. Let him rest, and we'll see how he is."

His head pillowed on Stone's thigh, Moon mumbled, "Why did she do it? I was lying when I said I remembered her."

"We don't know," Stone said, and ruffled his hair. "Go to sleep."



Moon opened his eyes sometime later to a fall of dawn light from

the opening to the central well. A stir of air carried the damp scent of the waterfall. He was curled in a nest of blankets near the hearth, his clothes were soaked with sweat, and he felt as if he had slept face down in cold mud all night.

Stone lay a short distance away, sprawled on his back and growling faintly in his sleep. They were alone except for an Arbora, an older male with dark copper skin and dark curly hair, who sat on the other side of the hearth. Moon recognized him as one of the mentors who had helped Lithe last night. At least he assumed it was last night. The bedding had been changed and the place cleaned; it smelled of nothing now except the waterfall and the green scents drifting in from the central well.

The Arbora said, "I'm Auburn. How are you feeling?"

Moon croaked, "Hollow." He had a vague dream-like memory of having to get up in the middle of the night for an urgent visit to the latrine in the bathing room. It hadn't been a pleasant experience. He still felt like he had lost some important internal organs in the process.

"Ah." Auburn set a kettle on the heating stones. "I have a tea that should help, very mild. Will you take some?"

Moon started to say yes, then remembered that accepting food from Opal Night Arbora was what got him into this. Auburn seemed to realize that, and said, with a wry smile, "I'll drink a cup first."

Moon nodded. Watching Auburn sort pressed leaves into the pot, he asked, "If nobody poisons anybody here, why did you have an antidote to what Russet gave me?"

"We have an antidote to tree-asp stings," Auburn corrected. "The hunters and soldiers get bitten occasionally. Since you actually had the venom inside you, we had to modify that simple and combine it with something that would protect your stomach and gut while the antidote was working." He poured the warm water into the pot, and added grimly, "Fortunately, Russet is not a mentor, and didn't know how to make a truly effective poison from the venom."

If that wasn't effective, Moon would have hated to see one that was.

Stone snorted and sat straight up, so suddenly that Auburn flinched. Moon was still too half-conscious to flinch. Stone rubbed his face, and squinted at Moon. "You all right?"

Moon nodded and shrugged. He felt terrible, but he was pretty certain he wasn't dying anymore. Stone yawned.

It didn't look like Stone had had a very good night either.

Considering the condition Moon had been in, he was glad Stone was the only one to see it besides the mentors. “Where’s Jade and the others?”

Auburn said, “Malachite made everyone leave except your line-grandfather to give us room to work. Lithe and Reed are taking their turn to rest.” He poured a cup of tea, drank it, then poured a second and handed it to Moon. “I’ll go and tell them all you’re awake. I know they’ve been very worried, even after you took a turn for the better last night.”

As Auburn got to his feet and left the bower, Moon sniffed the tea cautiously, then tasted it. It was warm water barely flavored with tea, but when he drank the cup it soothed his dry throat, and his stomach decided it might live after all. “What happened to Russet?” he asked Stone.

“Nothing, yet. They had to wait to see if you recovered.” Stone scratched his head vigorously, still trying to wake himself up. “It’s a bad situation for the whole court.”

Moon refused to feel guilty, or tried to. Every Raksuran court he visited seemed to face trouble because of him, sooner or later. He just hoped nothing had happened to Viridian Sea. And while Tempest’s sister Halcyon had ended up fighting to the death, and he knew warriors were punished with exile and became solitaires, he had never seen or heard of an Arbora doing anything bad enough to warrant any punishment whatsoever. He had never even seen one get the slap to the head usually meted out to warriors for their transgressions. “So... what are they going to do to her?”

Stone gave him a look. “She tried to kill a consort. The only consort left in the reigning queen’s bloodline. What do you think they’re going to do to her?”



Moon wanted nothing more than to crawl back into the blankets and sleep, but there was too much that had to be done.

Auburn returned with Lithe and two more mentors, who came to check Moon over again and to advise that he sleep for the rest of the day. Moon sent them away to tell Malachite that whatever she planned to do with Russet, he wanted to be there, and to tell her he was going back to the groundling city to talk to them again about the Fell unless somebody came up with a better plan.

He had been thinking of Malachite as an enemy. It had finally hit home at some point last night, maybe when she had touched his face,

that what Celadon and Umber and everyone else had told him was true. That she might be a powerful ally.

She already meant to stop the Fell. Getting her to stop them before they destroyed Aventura was going to be the problem. Once Moon had that figured out, getting her to let him return to Indigo Cloud with Jade shouldn't be nearly as difficult. He hoped.

One thing he desperately needed before any of this was a bath, and he was standing under the cool water channel when Chime walked into the bathing room with a bundle under his arm. Chime said, "Good, you really are better. From the message you sent with the Arbora, we thought so, but it's a relief to see it."

"Where's Jade?"

"In the queens' hall with Malachite. She sent the rest of us back to the flying boat to rest, but she stayed." He regarded Moon intently. "So... how are you?"

"Fine." At Chime's expression, Moon admitted, "Not so good. But we don't have time."

Chime hesitated, then clearly decided there was no point in arguing. He put the bundle down on the flat stone table used for drying clothes. "Your mother sent you some gifts. If you don't take them, she might kill me. I mean, that was just the impression I got."

Moon stepped out of the pool and dried off. He felt more alert, more able to at least get his eyes all the way open. He hadn't tried to shift yet, and he still felt too weak to make the effort. He felt too weak to be standing up, actually, and sat down on the edge of the bathing pool. "What did she send?"

Chime opened the bundle and pulled out clothes, laying them out on the drying rock. They were of a very fine material but sturdy, like the cloth Indigo Cloud had made at the old colony. The shirt was black and the pants a dark gray, and there was a belt made of a very soft, dark mottled hide, set with tiny rounds of bone intricately carved into flowers. There was also a long robe, the dark fabric woven in strips of different textures, the collar trimmed with a heavy brocade. It was possibly the most expensive looking garment Moon had ever seen in his life.

Watching Moon's lack of reaction, Chime said, "This is nice, and probably meant well, and accepting presents from your birthqueen doesn't obligate you to anything—"

"It's all right, Chime," Moon said, too weary to be really exasperated. "I won't send them back."

“Oh, good.” Chime looked relieved. “There was this, too. I think it’s jewelry.” He held out a small packet of silky cloth.

Moon unwrapped the piece. It was a small disk made of ivory, carved into waved lines that in Raksuran art symbolized the wind. The pointed ends all went to the left, which meant it was a west wind. A darker rim of jade had once circled it, but had snapped off halfway around. From that and the rough texture of the back, Moon could tell it had once been part of a larger piece.

Chime leaned over to see, and his brow furrowed in confusion. “It’s broken.”

Moon rubbed his thumb over a reddish stain on the ivory. “That’s blood.”

They looked at each other. Chime said, “Your mother is strange. I think I owe Pearl an apology for all the things I’ve ever thought...” He drew in a sharp breath in realization. “Unless that belonged to...”

“Her consort, my father.” Moon closed his hand over the disk.



Stone and Chime walked Moon to the queens’ hall and stopped outside. Only Opal Night Raksura were to be present for this.

When Moon stepped into the queens’ hall, everyone stared at him. For once he didn’t mind. He had meant to make an entrance this time.

Malachite, with Celadon behind her, sat in the center of the chamber. Around the walls were twenty or so older Arbora, probably the leaders of the castes and all the prominent elders, plus all the mentors Moon had seen last night. Moon recognized Feather, the teacher who had taken care of him before the eastern colony was attacked. Lithe and Auburn were there too, and Moss, the young Arbora male that Russet had accused. A group of warriors sat behind Malachite and Celadon, mostly older females, including Rise. Onyx and her daughter queens and consorts and warriors were conspicuously absent. Moon took that to mean that this was only for the Arbora and the members of Malachite’s bloodline. Everyone was in groundling form, and even Celadon wore her Arbora form. Only Malachite kept her wings.

Malachite was also the only one who didn’t show any sign of surprise or agitation at Moon’s appearance. She indicated a pile of cushions a few paces from her side. It was a relief; Moon was trembling just from the walk here. He had drunk an entire pot of tea and eaten a little dry bread, but Auburn thought he should make sure that stayed down before he tried anything more substantial. Moon

agreed with the advice, but lack of food made him cold and weak.

Moon went to the cushions and sat down, managing it with only a small thump when his legs gave out at the last moment. Malachite watched him, and he realized she had seen that he wore the ivory piece on a cord around his neck. She pulled her gaze away from it. "Get him another wrap."

All the warriors twitched to obey the command but Rise was closest and got to her feet first. She brought Moon a silky blanket from the pile to one side of the room and he took it without protest.

As Rise returned to her seat, Malachite said, "You don't have to be here."

"I want to be here," Moon said. His voice still came out hoarse and weak. "Did Auburn give you my message?"

"Yes." Malachite's tail tip flicked, the only sign of agitation or impatience that she had betrayed so far. "Why do you care so much about this groundling city?"

"Just because they're vulnerable and too stupid to realize it doesn't mean they should die." He added deliberately, "And because I think you have a plan to use them as bait, so you can attack while the Fell are distracted."

There was another stir in the room, an uneasy one this time, and Celadon's spines trembled anxiously. That told Moon he was right. He hadn't thought Malachite, who had rescued the remnants of her court and killed off an entire Fell flight into the bargain, would wait long before deciding what to do. Or that she would disregard an obvious advantage.

Malachite tilted her head and regarded him steadily. Moon forced himself not to drop his gaze. After a long moment, her tail tip flicked again and she said, "We'll speak of that later."

She looked away, and Moon tried to make his exhalation of relief silent. She said, "Bring Russet."

Two of the younger Arbora got up and went out, to return a few moments later with Russet. She wasn't restrained in any way, but she was surrounded by a group of young male and female Arbora, with the strong builds and rough practical clothing that usually indicated soldiers. Moon wasn't sure what he was expecting, but after her furious reaction to being caught last night, Russet's expression now surprised him. Her eyes were downcast, and she looked grave and sad.

The soldiers stepped away from her and went to sit down, leaving her in the center of the room, ten paces from Malachite.

One of the older Arbora said, “Three different mentors have looked into Russet’s mind, and whatever happened in the past, there is no Fell influence now.”

A sigh went through the Arbora, a shocked murmur through the warriors. Moon translated that to mean that the Arbora had been hoping against hope that Russet had been acting under Fell influence, and so was not responsible for anything she had done. The warriors had assumed that she was under Fell influence, that no Arbora would do this of her own volition. Moon thought she might have been influenced turns ago during the attack; she would have no memory of it. This might be what happened if the influence remained and the victim was never made aware of it, that it would do strange things to your thoughts, even after all trace of it finally faded. He was glad Balm wasn’t here to see this.

Russet looked up at the reaction, and her gaze fell on Moon. She went still for a moment, then looked down again.

It was Celadon who said, “This is your chance to speak for yourself, Russet. Tell us what happened.”

Russet drew a sharp breath, then said, “It started back then, at the eastern colony.” She stopped, clenching her jaw, as if speaking of it was painful. Moon felt the first creeping doubt that she was playacting, that the truth of her feelings was very different.

“Go on,” another Arbora said. They were all watching her, as still as if they were stalking prey. Some looked openly distressed, like Moss, but with the others it was hard to tell.

Russet wet her lips, and said, “I used to go out with the hunters, sometimes. One day I got separated from them. I met... a creature in the forest. I thought it was a groundling at first, then I realized it was a strange kind of shifter. It asked me questions. It... It’s easy to say I should have known. But it was hard not to answer. I don’t remember what it did, but I told it everything it wanted to know.” She swallowed. “It was a Fell ruler.”

It was all too possible. According to Feather, the court had never encountered Fell before. The first time Moon had seen Fell in the groundling city of Saraseil, he thought he might have been one of them.

“When they attacked, when they killed the soldiers and the other teachers to get to the nurseries, I knew they had been lying. Swift heard me beg them... She heard enough to know I had spoken to one before. They let me live; I don’t know why. I ran into Swift and she accused me... I lied to her, I told her I wasn’t the only one, that there

were others. If she tried to tell anyone, it would be all of us against her, and no one would believe her.” She looked at Moon squarely for the first time. “She left, and I never saw her again. That must have been when she fled with you and the other children.”

Swift, Moon thought in the silence that followed. Swift who changed her name to Sorrow. In some ways, none of this was a surprise.

Then Malachite’s voice fell into the silence like a clatter of steel. “You’re lying.”

Russet stared at her. “I... No...”

Malachite’s claws flexed. “Swift was a young warrior, the only survivor of a sickly clutch who had not much distinguished herself in the court, but she was not a fool. Subsequent events proved she obviously didn’t lack for courage. You told her there were others who had turned against the court and would falsely accuse her, but I believe she also saw something that so appalled her that she fled with no hope of ever returning.”

As if she couldn’t contain herself a second longer, Feather burst out, “All the fledgling consorts were together with Yarrow. Why did Swift save Moon and not the others? What happened to Yarrow? Swift must have run across my—the Arbora babies on the way out, but if she had found more fledglings alive—” Feather’s fists clenched, as if she fought the urge not to shift and leap on Russet. “Why didn’t she take the others?”

There was a low chorus of hisses from the Arbora, as Feather’s words hit home. Celadon’s spines flared. Moon struggled to remember, focused on that one image that had surfaced when he had first met Feather, of clinging to Sorrow—to Swift as she flew, the others crying. But there was nothing else.

Malachite said, “Answer Feather’s question.”

Russet’s face twisted in fury. “I don’t know what Swift was thinking. How could I?”

“What were you thinking?” one of the other Arbora asked, harsh with anger. “If that was what happened, if you were tricked and deceived by the Fell, why didn’t you tell us? We could have forgiven you that. Especially later, with all we learned of them.”

“We could have forgiven you that,” Malachite said. “If that was all you did.” Her tail tip twitched. “There would be no reason to kill the only surviving consort of my last clutch, for terror of what he might know. There would be no reason for fear and guilt to eat you

for all these turns, until there is nothing of you left but this shell.”

Feather persisted, “What did Swift see you do? You didn’t just tell the Fell how to get in. Did you take them to the fledgling consorts, hand them over to the rulers?” Her voice rose. “Did you kill Yarrow yourself?”

“Tell them,” Moon said, and his voice came out in that harsh croak. “Tell them what you did.”

Russet stared at him, then her face twisted, turning ugly and desperate. “It wasn’t me. The Fell forced me—”

“Tell them,” Moon repeated. “Or I will.” His heart thumped at the chance he was taking. If she refused, he would have to admit he didn’t remember and they would never know what had happened.

Russet growled, then gasped out, “They promised they’d spare my children! My clutch, they were all warrior fledglings. But the Fell lied, they killed them, they didn’t want warriors—” She stopped, fighting for calm. “I had to kill the royal fledglings. I did it so the Fell wouldn’t get them. I did it—I did it—I wanted to hurt the Fell, and taking away what they wanted so badly was the only way. Yarrow tried to stop me, he didn’t understand. I killed him too. That’s what Swift saw. Moon was the only one left. She got him before the rulers could.”

Celadon turned to Moon. “You saw this?”

He shook his head, too cold inside to feel any victory. “I don’t remember it.”

Despair and fury warred on Russet’s face. She stared at Moon, her lips forming a silent snarl. “You said you did.”

“I’m a good liar too,” he told her.

Feather shifted and sprang. Moon had time to think that this would be the end of Russet, but Malachite was suddenly on her feet, in the center of the room. She caught Feather around the waist, held her easily despite the spines and flailing claws. Feather’s growl rose to a deep shout of rage. “I’ll kill her! Let me be the one to kill her!”

“No.” Malachite dropped her. Feather landed on her feet and crouched, snarling up at her. Then the snarl died away. Feather shifted to groundling, sat down hard, and buried her face in her hands. Malachite turned toward Russet.

Russet backed away, growling low. Malachite said, “You might have been tricked by the Fell in the past, but there was no trick when you poisoned the last consort of my bloodline.”

“You’ll kill me?” Russet bared her teeth and sneered up at her. “A

queen kill an Arbora? The word will spread through the other courts
—”

“Yes, it’s unheard of, almost unthinkable.” It was another Arbora who spoke. She stood and moved forward into the center of the room, and stopped beside Feather. Her skin was tinted gray with age and her gray hair had streaks of pure white. She gazed at Russet, her face set with cold condemnation. “Like an Arbora killing another Arbora, killing fledglings, killing a consort. You were a teacher.” She almost spat the word. “What have you become now?”

Russet snarled, her expression twitching through fury, desperation, despair, and back. “I... I did...” She snarled, “I did what I had to!”

The older Arbora said to Malachite, “You’re right. It’s this or exile, and she has reason to hate all of us now that we know her secret. We could never feel safe again.” She leaned down, caught Feather’s wrist, and hauled her up and away from Malachite.

Malachite swept the room with a glance, but there were no objections. All the Arbora watched her, waiting.

Russet broke and lunged away. Malachite moved so swiftly Moon didn’t realize it until he heard the crack of bone snapping. Russet collapsed, a limp heap. Moon heard the sigh as the last breath left her lungs.

Moon didn’t flinch, his reactions slowed by the aftereffects of the poison, but he was the only one. A low hiss sounded through the room, of dismay, relief, sorrow.

Malachite turned away. A few of the Arbora stood, one draped a blanket over the body, and they began to gather it up. The others spoke quietly, sadly.

Moon didn’t feel any satisfaction; mostly what he felt was emptiness. Swift had seen terrible things. Not knowing that the Fell could influence Raksuran minds, it must have been a profound shock. She must have thought everyone in the court had gone mad. If she hadn’t, she would have tried to look for other survivors, and your life would have been completely different. He had no idea how he felt about that. It seemed pointless to feel anything about it at all. He looked up to realize Malachite stood over him. She said, “Go and rest now.”

She showed absolutely no sign, in her eyes or expression or body language, that she had just killed an Arbora. All the others in the room, warriors and Arbora alike, even though they had known what

was coming and supported it, were either as shocked as if the floor had just collapsed under them or looked as drained and worn as if they had been ill for months. Moon pushed those thoughts aside. “I want to talk to you about the Fell.”

“You need to rest, or you’ll be unable to do anything including talk.” After a moment, she flicked a spine in resignation. “I’ll make no decision about the groundling city today. We’ll speak of it tomorrow morning.”

He knew it was a concession, but he wasn’t sure it was enough. “Is there time?”

“There should be,” Celadon said. “Our last report from the scouts said that the Fell haven’t moved toward the city yet.”

Yet, Moon thought, but he didn’t protest when Auburn came to help him to his feet.

Chapter Fourteen

Moon got to his feet slowly and left with Auburn. Just outside the queens' chamber they were joined by Chime, who had been hiding in the passage. No one said anything, and as they made their way through the corridors, the whole colony was quiet and somber. Moon was thinking that he would need to send Chime with a message for Jade; he needed to talk to her for a number of different reasons, but he didn't think he could make the walk to the flying boat right now. So it was a relief when they reached the consorts' hall and he saw that Jade sat beside the hearth with Stone.

Jade stood. Her gaze swept over him as if she couldn't quite believe he was on his feet and moving. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, and drew the robe around him more tightly. He was shivering and still felt feverish. "Malachite killed her."

Jade took a sharp breath. "I see."

Stone grimaced and took the kettle off the hearth to pour tea. "It's a bad thing, but I don't see that Malachite had a choice."

"Russet admitted everything," Auburn said, and steadied Moon as he sank down to sit on a pile of handy cushions. "Well, almost everything. But she was under no Fell influence."

Jade sat next to Moon, watching him with concern. Then her brows lifted. She touched the ivory disk on his chest with a delicate claw, frowning. "What is that?"

"Malachite gave it to me." Moon turned it so she could see the stain. "It's got blood on it, so..."

"Oh." Jade withdrew her hand, her spines flicking in consternation. Then she asked, "Did Russet say what it was that she was afraid you had remembered?"

"Yes." His voice was hoarse again. Moon took the cup of tea Stone passed him and drank it before he told her what Russet had said. "I must have seen her kill the others, but I don't remember anything."

"Did you know Russet?" Chime asked Auburn. "I mean, was she your friend, or..."

"I don't know why she would do this," Auburn answered the

unspoken question. He looked drawn and weary. "I think the realization of what she had done, the guilt and the fear of it being revealed, the deaths of so many in the court... I think it turned her mind, and she was canny enough to hide it from us all this time. I don't think the real Russet, the Russet we knew, survived the attack."

Everyone was silent as they considered that uncomfortable thought.

Jade stirred and tugged absently at the hem of a cushion. "But it can't be her who told the new Fell flight about the crossbreeds. If they had no connection with her mind..."

Stone rubbed his eyes wearily. "It means there's someone else here who did."

Auburn's expression was even more grim. "The mentors are searching among those who returned from the old colony." He shook his head. "After all this time, and the death of the Fell rulers, I don't think an influence could have lasted. It didn't with Russet."

Moon heard light steps in the passage, then Lithe appeared in the doorway. He assumed she was here to take Auburn's place, but she hesitated a moment. "I wanted to speak to you all, about the Fell."

Jade glanced at Moon, and he nodded. She told Lithe, "Come and sit down."

Lithe crossed behind Auburn and took a seat on a cushion, facing them all. She took a deep breath. "I'm under suspicion, because the ruler hiding in the groundling city told Celadon that the Fell came here for crossbreeds. Everyone wonders why this flight came here, now, after so long, if they weren't called by one of us. By a crossbreed. Because I'm a mentor, I'm the most likely."

It might be most likely, but Moon doubted it. Maybe that made him a fool, but he just couldn't see Lithe as a Fell spy. Part of it was her physical appearance; she didn't look any more like the groundling form of a dakti than Moon or Jade did. The other factor was the look in her eyes. She didn't have that Fell emptiness, the feeling that you were talking to a shell that was only intermittently filled with personality. He had seen too many rulers close up to mistake that.

He reminded himself that Russet hadn't seemed suspicious, either.

Jade tilted her head, watching Lithe with a thoughtful intensity. Lithe didn't flinch from it, but the bronze of her cheeks darkened in a flush. Jade said, "But why would you? You don't seem to have been badly treated here."

"I haven't been, Malachite made sure of that. This is my home,

my court, why should I betray it?" Lithe spread her hands. "But I'm half-Fell. It's not that I don't understand their suspicion. Somehow this flight knows about us, knows that we're here. Malachite is certain none of the rulers of the flight that attacked us survived. We should have no connection to the Fell, no way for them to find us."

Stone said, "The Fell know their own. Rulers can sense each other over long distances."

"But I would feel it," Lithe protested. She pressed a hand to her chest. "I'm a mentor. I would know. I'm sure I would. And if they can't touch my mind, how could they touch any of the others, who have no mentor senses?"

Jade asked Chime, "Is that possible?"

Chime's expression was deeply conflicted. "Flower sensed the Fell were watching the old Indigo Cloud colony long before we found any evidence of it, and they weren't even focusing on her. I'd think... I'd think a half-Fell mentor would have to know that their attention was on her, that they were trying to touch her mind." He shrugged helplessly. "But I can't say for certain. It's not as if there are precedents for this."

Auburn was looking at him oddly. "I agree. But how do you...?"

"I used to be a mentor," Chime said irritably. "I changed, because our court was under pressure and didn't have enough warriors." He hesitated. "That... It's never happened to anyone here, after so many warriors were killed in the eastern colony?"

Auburn was thoughtful now. "No. But I recall something in the histories about such things happening in the past."

Moon asked Lithe, "Are we related?"

That caught Lithe by surprise. She stared for a moment, then dropped her gaze. She fiddled with the beads on one of her bracelets. "I don't know. I never saw... I was still a baby, when Malachite rescued us. The earliest thing I remember is the nurseries here."

Malachite would know, Moon thought. Lithe might have been the daughter of one of the captured Arbora, but everyone had told him that consorts were more likely to father Arbora mentors.

Stone's expression didn't give any hint as to whether he believed Lithe or not. "So why are you talking to us?"

Lithe gestured in appeal. "I need help to prove that I and the rest of the crossbreeds have nothing to do with the Fell." She faced Jade again. "And you want to take Moon as your consort, and Malachite

won't talk about that until after she destroys this Fell flight. So I want to set a trap. The Fell want crossbreeds. Let's make them think they can get one. Use me as bait. Then we can catch a ruler and make it tell us how it knew about the court."

Jade tilted her head. "'We' can catch a ruler?"

"Well, you and the line-grandfather, and the other queens," Lithe admitted. "But I know Moon wants to talk to the Aventeran groundlings again. If you go there and take me with you, perhaps the Fell who are watching the city will come after me. We could camp for the night, in a vulnerable spot—"

"And the Fell won't find that suspicious," Stone commented blandly.

Lithe glared at Stone in frustration, but Moon said, "They would be suspicious, but that wouldn't stop them from attacking us. They'd send some dakti or even a lesser ruler to spring the trap just to see what we wanted." From Stone's description it was a huge flight, and there were bound to be more rulers like Ivades, young and stupid enough to let the others send them on dangerous tasks.

"We had a ruler at Aventera," Stone pointed out, "and we didn't have much luck getting the truth out of him."

"You smashed him too hard," Moon reminded him. "And that was before we knew he had anything to tell us except that the Fell were here to eat the city."

"Yes," Lithe said with spirit. "If you don't kill our captives, we might get more information."

Jade regarded Stone. "You just don't want us to do this."

"I don't, because it's a bad plan," Stone said. Then he shrugged in resignation. "But that doesn't mean I don't think we should do it. She's right; the court has to know how the Fell found out about the crossbreeds. We're not going to be able to get Malachite to let you have Moon until this is all settled." He gave Moon a grim glare. "You haven't helped with that at all."

That part at least was not Moon's fault. "I've been busy almost dying," he pointed out.

Lithe sat up, hope in her expression. "Then you'll help me?"

Jade's spines flicked in annoyance at all of them. She turned to Moon. "You and Celadon already tried to warn the groundling city and they didn't listen, even when they saw they had a Fell in their midst."

“But Delin said he would try to talk to them. If they don’t listen to him... Then they’re on their own.” Moon rubbed his face. “I just want to try one more time.”

Jade pressed her lips together, clearly not happy. “Is this about Saraseil?”

He glared at her. “Of course it’s about Saraseil. It’s about every groundling settlement that was ever attacked by Fell.”

Jade growled under her breath, but said, “And how am I going to talk your birthqueen who hates me into this?”

“I’ll take care of that part,” Moon told her.



Malachite had already refused to speak to Moon about any of this until tomorrow, so he spent the rest of the day trying to shake off the last effects of the poison. This involved mostly sleeping, drinking water and tea, eating small quantities of fruit and bread to make sure his insides could handle it, and being poked at by various mentors.

At Moon’s insistence, Jade brought Delin back to the consorts’ hall so Moon could talk to him about the Aventerans. They met up in Moon’s bower for privacy.

Delin had brought his book of notes and sketches and added to it as he sat beside the hearth and listened to Jade describe Lithe’s plan. The idea so far was to take Delin’s flying boat to the city so he could speak to the Aventerans about the Fell. Then on the way back, Lithe and the other Raksura would stop at a flying island to camp for the night while the boat returned to the colony. Hopefully the Fell would take the chance offered to try to capture Lithe. But Stone, Malachite, and a number of warriors would already be concealed nearby. That was the plan, if they could get all the people involved to cooperate.

There had been some discussion of whether they should try to set the trap on the way to the city, and what would happen if the Fell attacked the ship before they reached the spot where the others would be lying in wait. It was a risk, but Stone thought that if they were likely to be attacked at all, it would be after the ship had visited the city. There hadn’t been any hint of Fell presence in the fringe of the Reaches, only on the city’s plateau and the plains beyond.

When Jade finished describing this, Delin said, “I agree, under one condition.”

Moon had been expecting this. Delin had come a long way across largely unknown territory for the chance to see the Reaches and to visit Raksuran colonies. He would have been shocked if the old man

had shown any sign of turning back now. Jade nodded, and said, "You want to be paid? We can give you more pearls."

Delin gave her a look that combined amusement and pity. "My family are traders and explorers; I am a scholar. My payment is to be allowed to stay at your temporary camp and see the Fell with my own eyes, and to watch your interrogation of the ruler."

Yes, that was what Moon had thought. He said, "You want to end up like what's-his-name who visited the Ghobin?"

Delin snorted. "You mean Venar-Inram-Alil, who was a very famous scholar of predatory species."

"From what you said, he's a very famous dead scholar of predatory species."

"He was not accompanied by Raksura," Delin countered. "But this is not a risk I would ask the rest of my young crew to take. Or allow them to take, even if they asked. I would stipulate that the crew remain here under the care of this court. And that if I do not return and the ship cannot be salvaged, that a message be carried to our family on the Golden Isles, so a new ship can be sent to retrieve them."

The scales above Jade's brow furrowed. Possibly she was doing the same as Moon, and envisioning an outcome where this went so wrong that Delin ended up dead and his flying boat destroyed. She said, "I agree that the other groundlings on your boat should be left behind, if you stay with us to bait the trap... But I wish you wouldn't stay with us."

"I'm an old man," Delin said seriously. "I cannot allow these chances to understand more of our worlds pass me by."

Jade tried, but Delin wouldn't change his mind. Moon gave up, told him he could stay to draw the carvings in the consorts' bowers and hall, and curled up in the furs to go back to sleep.

Moon woke sometime later, clear-headed and ravenously hungry. He threw back the blanket that covered his head and sat up, rubbing bleary eyes. "I need to eat."

Chime said, "Uh, there's someone here who wants to see you."

Moon looked up. Shade sat on a cushion near the doorway, while Chime sat near the bowl hearth and watched him nervously. No one else was in the room, and their attitudes seemed very awkward. It dawned on Moon that Chime might not have trouble with Lithe, who looked like any other young Arbora, but that Shade's pale skin was just too close to how a Fell ruler appeared in groundling form. Moon

said, "Chime, go ask them to bring me something to eat. A grasseater."

Chime glanced at him, worried. "Are you sure?"

Moon hissed. He was starving. "Yes, go."

Chime reluctantly got to his feet. "You want me to get Stone first?"

"Not unless he has a grasseater."

Clearly still unhappy, Chime stepped out of the bower. From scent and sound, Moon and Shade were the only ones here. The mentors had eased off their vigilance in the late afternoon, when it had become clear that Moon was improving at the right pace. Jade had left to go to the flying boat at sunset, it having been made clear to her through a fairly diplomatic Celadon that staying overnight in Moon's bower would occasion a violent reaction on Malachite's part. Moon had no idea where Stone was.

Shade asked, "Are you all right?" He looked uneasy. "They told me what happened. I wanted to see you last night but they said it wasn't a good idea."

"I'm fine." Moon ran his hands through his hair and scratched his scalp vigorously. He felt better now than he had all day, except for being about to starve to death. "If you'd come last night, I wouldn't have known you were here."

Shade nodded, then carefully broached the uncomfortable topic everyone who came to the bower wanted to talk about. "About Russet... I don't understand how something like that could happen."

Moon started to speak, hesitated, then decided there was no point in withholding it. He said, "The Fell made her do things she couldn't live with, so she didn't. She became a different person."

Shade took that in silently. After a moment, he said, "Your warrior was afraid of me."

"The Fell crossbreeds he's seen weren't like you."

Shade lifted his shoulders as if shaking something off his back. "I think of it, sometimes. What I'd be like if Malachite hadn't rescued us. It's not just that they live so differently. No stories, no books, no carving, no drawings. The mentors say the Fell don't feel things like we do. I feel things all the time. I feel a lot of things. I just don't..." The words came out in an impulsive burst, as if he had held them back for a long time. "I don't see how I could be part of that. I know I am, I mean, I know it's not some mistake and I'm just a funny-looking Raksura, but..."

“They feel things,” Moon said. He had seen enough himself to know it was true. “They get angry, they care about each other. At least the rulers do. Maybe the kethel and the dakti do, too, but just not in a way we can understand. But they don’t care about anything else. They’re predators, we’re prey. To them, that’s all there is.”

Shade said, wearily, “I don’t even like to watch the Arbora hunt.” He hesitated, then seemed to gather his resolve. “I want to go to the groundling city and be bait for the Fell.”

Moon stared. “How did you find out about that?”

“Lithe told me. Can I go?”

That was an easy question. “No.”

“Why not? I’m a consort, I’m much better bait than Lithe.” He added, as if it was self-evident, “And besides, she’s a mentor. She shouldn’t be put in danger.”

“Consorts shouldn’t be put in danger either.” Moon felt like a hypocrite saying it, but it was theoretically true, as far as the Raksura were concerned.

“Consorts who can breed shouldn’t be put in danger,” Shade corrected. “I can’t. But Lithe is a very good mentor.”

Moon felt he was too hungry to argue effectively. “If Malachite agrees to this at all, she’ll never agree to let you be bait.”

“She might.” Shade leaned forward, hopeful and persuasive. “If you ask her.”

Persuading Malachite at all was going to be tricky enough without this complication. “I won’t. This is your idea. You ask her.”

Shade might have continued trying to convince him, but Chime came back with two Arbora bearing recently killed grasseater haunches, and Moon was obviously too distracted for conversation. Moon shifted to be able to eat more effectively, and tore through his weight in fresh meat.

Shade left by the time he finished, and Stone reappeared again. Chime, watching Moon settle into the blankets, said, “I talked to Auburn. He said they wouldn’t let me use their library, because I’m not a mentor. But he would have some of the younger mentors look up the stories he remembered about Arbora changing into warriors for me.”

“That’s good.” Moon wasn’t sure it was good, at least not for Chime’s peace of mind. “What do you think they’ll find?”

“Nothing important.” Chime absently carded his fingers through the fur. “I just thought I should learn all I can, and this is such an old court.” He hesitated, and Moon started to think this conversation wasn’t really what Chime wanted to talk about. Then Chime said, “So that was really your...”

“Half clutchmate,” Moon supplied. So Chime really had been uneasy around Shade.

Chime rubbed his arms, uncomfortable. “Do you trust him?”

Stone, already stretched out on the blankets on the other side of the hearth, made a disparaging noise. It was either an editorial comment on the trustworthiness of half-Fell Raksura or on Moon’s ability to trust anybody; it was hard to tell which. Moon ignored him, and told Chime, “I don’t know. I think so. But he’s just been living here. He hasn’t been put in a situation where he...” He tried to think how to put it. “Where he would need to be trusted.”

Chime didn’t look happy. He pulled a blanket around and arranged it into a nest next to Moon. “But Malachite won’t let him come along to help bait the trap, will she?”

“No. No, she won’t.” Moon felt fairly certain of that. The trouble was going to be getting her to let them do it at all.



Early the next morning, after a quick consultation with Stone to find out how to approach a queen in formal Raksuran fashion, Moon sent Chime to ask Rise to ask Malachite if she would speak to him alone in her bower. He wanted to keep the meeting private, just in case the mentors were wrong and there was someone in the court who had been Fell-influenced. He also thought meeting without the pressure of an audience would make it easier, maybe on both of them.

Rise returned with Chime with gratifying speed, and told Moon Malachite would see him. Trying to put all his nerves and unresolved anger aside, Moon followed her.

Malachite’s private bower was a little way past the queens’ hall. It was a big room with a ceiling that formed a peak, with carvings of queens arching up the walls. Like some of the others Moon had seen in Opal Night, the hearth was on a low pedestal of stone. There was a strong scent of waterfall spray in the air, and a fall of natural light indicated an opening to the central well somewhere above one of the upper level balconies. The spell-lights were made of clumps of vine, growing out of niches in the carving.

When Rise led Moon in, a few warriors sat around on the

scattered cushions and furs; Malachite flicked a claw and they all scrambled to leave.

Rise waited until Moon had taken a seat on the furs across from Malachite, then she departed.

Moon took a deep breath, but before he could speak, Malachite said, "You're wearing it."

He knew she meant the ivory disk she had given him. It was still around his neck on a leather thong, a cool circle against his groundling skin. "It belonged to... your consort?" He couldn't make himself say "my father" in front of her.

"Yes." She didn't seem to want to hear it from him anymore than he wanted to say it. "I found it—" She cut the words off.

Moon wasn't sure what prompted him, but he said, "You can tell me."

She rippled her spines, in a way he couldn't interpret, but she said, "The progenitor had it." She tilted her head to look at him, her gaze sharp and direct. "The others don't know. You may tell Celadon, if you wish. But not Shade." She added, "I gutted her, so she could watch me kill her favorite rulers before she died."

"I won't tell Shade." Moon tried to think how much control Malachite must have had over the Fell flight by that point to be able to torture the progenitor in such a leisurely fashion. "How did you do it?"

It wasn't a very coherent question, but Malachite understood what he meant. Still holding his gaze, she said, "We took them at a vulnerable moment, when they were sated after feeding on a groundling city. It was built out of a rocky promontory, and had narrow corridors, small doors and windows. Not an ideal space for combat for the major kethel, or the dakti swarms. I caught one of the rulers outside and broke him, and he told me where the progenitor and the other rulers slept. I caught them unawares. The warriors started an avalanche that blocked the rest of the flight's escape." The claws of her right hand slowly flexed, almost involuntarily, the only hint that the memory affected her. "As they did to us."

Maybe it was just that simple. Kill the rulers and the progenitor, and it didn't matter if some of the infertile dakti or even the kethel survived. From everything Moon had seen and heard over the turns, the dakti and kethel lacked the ability to make mental connections with other Fell flights, and would not be offered shelter. "How do you break a ruler?"

She looked down at her hand and flexed her claws deliberately this time. It was a thoughtful rather than threatening gesture, as if she noticed they sometimes flexed on their own and was bemused by it. "The mentors believe that it's impossible. But the Fell don't lie when they say we were once the same species. And the rulers are used to obeying their female progenitors." She met his eyes again. "That need can be used against them."

Moon felt the skin creep right up his spine; it was partly uneasiness and partly a stir from his prey reflex. Thinking about killing Fell made his fingers itch. He said, "Is that what you're planning to do to this Fell flight? Let them destroy Aventera and then attack while they're vulnerable inside the city?"

Malachite tilted her head, but something in her otherwise opaque expression seemed more amused than angry. "It crossed my mind."

"But the Fell know Opal Night is here, now. They won't be vulnerable. They may use the city to set a trap for us."

"True." She had clearly considered the possibility already but just wasn't much concerned by it. "What do you propose?"

Moon had been thinking about this since he had first seen the city. "The groundlings at Aventera have projectile weapons, and flying craft. If they had time to prepare, and our help, they could set traps for the Fell. Like a flying craft driven into the giant sac the major kethel carried here, that then bursts into flame." He would bet that the Aventerans had things that could burst into flame on command; they seemed like that kind of people.

"It's a possibility." But Malachite didn't sound as if it was a possibility she preferred. She studied him so intently, Moon wanted to twitch. Sensing she might be testing his resolve, he didn't. "But the groundlings don't trust us enough to take our counsel, let alone our direction in battle."

It was hard enough to talk to a powerful Raksuran queen; this was like talking to a member of a completely different and unfamiliar species. Moon couldn't tell if he had a chance of convincing her of anything or if she just kept replying because she liked looking at him and wanted the encounter to continue. He persisted, "But they might trust Delin, the groundling scholar from the Golden Isles. He's used to speaking to all different species, and he knows a lot about Fell." Moon wasn't certain how much of a diplomat Delin was; possibly he was far too straightforward to be very good at it, at least with people like the Aventerans. But it was still worth a try. "If we speak through him, they may listen."

Malachite's tail actually almost twitched. "Delin is the old groundling from the flying ship, who saved your life?"

Moon frowned. "He saved my life?"

"Lithe said the simple he gave you aboard the ship slowed the poison's progress. It gave the mentors time to act."

"That's him." Moon considered adding that Delin really wanted to speak to the Aventerans and would take Malachite's approval of this as a personal favor, but resisted the impulse.

Malachite said, "Lithe also came to me with a plan."

"She told us about that, too. We want to combine her plan and ours."

Malachite didn't move, didn't flick a spine, didn't blink, but Moon got the sudden strong sense that he had just lost his audience. Her voice perceptibly colder, she said, "Lithe has no need to prove herself to me."

"I think she knows that." Moon knew the ground underfoot had suddenly turned treacherous, and he had no idea why. "But she wants to prove herself to the others."

"What others?"

"I don't know." Moon added, "Maybe she wants to prove it to herself."

He thought that was a pretty good answer, but Malachite evidently didn't. "Lithe has never shown any need for this before."

"The Fell never came here before." Maybe he needed to put this on a less personal level. Moon had known Lithe for only a few days; he couldn't claim to be an expert in what she needed or wanted. "Auburn told us the mentors are looking for people from the eastern colony who might have been influenced by the Fell, but they can't find anyone. You need to know how the Fell found out about your crossbreeds."

Malachite showed the tip of one fang. "How many of these thoughts came from the Sister Queen of Indigo Cloud?"

Moon felt his skin go hot with anger. "You're insulting me." He couldn't keep the growl out of his voice.

"She has insulted both of us." Malachite's spines lifted. "She thinks to use this as a way to force me to acquiesce to her claim on you."

"It's not a claim. I'm taken. She asked me and I consented."

“You had no idea what you were agreeing to.”

“I did in every way that mattered.”

“You had no right to consent—”

“Because you own me?” Moon’s patience snapped and he pushed to his feet. She wouldn’t let him shift, so he didn’t try. “You gave up any right to me when you left me behind.”

It was possibly the most deliberately cruel thing Moon had ever said to anybody, and he knew the instant the words were out he would regret them, but in this moment they were deeply satisfying. He saw Malachite take the blow and steel herself against her own reaction. Her spines rattled like a death knell, and the muscles in her jaw tightened, suppressing a growl or a hiss or the urge to bite his head off. But her anger was less frightening than the iron control in her voice. “Nevertheless. Indigo Cloud took advantage of you, knowingly.”

Moon had the sudden impulse to make that control snap. He hissed bitter amusement. “You’re lucky it was Indigo Cloud that found me.”

That did it. Malachite’s tail lashed. A real full-length lash clearly expressive of her angry consternation. “What does that mean?”

“I didn’t know what I was. I could have become anything. I would have, if someone had promised me a place to belong. The first time I saw Fell, I thought I was one. Of course, in your court, that wouldn’t be a problem.” His voice rose and he couldn’t stop it. “You have no more right over me than that dead progenitor has over Shade!”

He turned toward the doorway. Malachite landed in front of him in a near-silent bound; Moon jerked back, hissing. She lifted her hands, claws retracted. “Wait.”

He stepped back, watching her warily.

“This changes nothing.” Malachite stepped away from the door. She had gone from rage to cool composure in less than a heartbeat. Her self-control was daunting, infuriating, and completely intact. “If your groundling agrees, let him ready his craft to go to Aventera. I’ll speak to Lithe and the other mentors about the rest.”

At the moment, all Moon wanted to do was yell more. He stepped past her and went through the passage out of the bower. When he reached the larger room just outside, he found several warriors sitting around the hearth staring at him in various degrees of shock. They had heard that last shout, and it would be all over the court by this afternoon. Growling under his breath, Moon shifted and tore out of

the room.

He found Chime waiting for him in the passage back to the consorts' hall. Chime took in his expression as Moon shifted back to groundling, and said, "You lost your temper?"

"Yes." Moon made himself take a deep breath.

Chime's shoulders slumped in disappointment. "So she won't let us talk to the groundlings or trap the Fell?"

"No. She'll do that." Moon was fairly sure of it. She would give that to him, because he wanted it. Malachite was willing to give him anything he wanted except Jade and Indigo Cloud.

Chapter Fifteen

As Moon predicted, Rise came to him around mid-morning to tell him that Malachite had agreed to Lithe's plan.

After that, there was a flurry of preparations.

The spot chosen to set the trap was a flying island floating over the plain less than a half day of warriors' flight from Aventera's plateau. The group who would go and wait in hiding near it was small: Stone, Malachite, two of Onyx's daughter queens, and some of their warriors. The Opal Night warriors were among those who had been examined by the mentors for Fell influence, but they wouldn't be told where they were going or why until they reached the spot.

Jade and Balm were also going, though Moon wasn't certain how Jade had managed it. He doubted Malachite had changed her opinion of Jade over the course of the morning.

Before they left, Moon managed to see Jade alone for a moment, catching her attention from a cubby off one of the colony entrance passages while the others assembled outside.

Jade glanced down the corridor cautiously as she stepped into the cubby. Moon asked her, "How did you get Malachite to let you come with her?"

Jade bared her teeth in frustration. "I didn't, I'm just going. As a queen, I have every right to help defend the Reaches. If she tries to stop me, it'll cause more trouble than it's worth to her." She hissed. "Of course, it's hard to tell if she knows I'm going or not because she's pretending I don't exist." She squeezed his wrist and said, "Are you really staying behind?"

There had been some discussion over whether Moon was well enough to go on the flying boat to Aventera or not, or if he should stay here. Moon was handling it by waiting until everyone with the authority or physical prowess to stop him had left to set the ambush, then he was going to join Delin and the others on the boat. This seemed to be the best way to avoid loud, emotionally-charged arguments. He had had too many of those lately.

"Probably... not," Moon admitted reluctantly.

Jade twitched her spines, but didn't object. Possibly she didn't

feel she had much right to argue with him, considering how she had inserted herself and Balm into the ambush portion of the plan. “Just be careful around those groundlings. You don’t know what the Fell have made them believe about us. And remember that Lithe is the bait, not you.”

It meant a great deal at that moment that she hadn’t tried to order him to stay behind or to talk him out of it. He managed to say, “You be careful, too. And Balm.”

Jade said, “We’ll be fine.” She pulled him close, nipped his neck gently, then slipped away.

Moon waited until Stone and the queens left, then went to the flying boat.

Delin’s crew of twelve young Islanders, most related to him, were not keen on the idea of letting him sail to Aventura alone, even with the help of friendly Raksura. Moon wasn’t sure how Delin convinced them or forced them, but they were reluctantly leaving the boat by climbing down a long rope ladder to the platform in front of the colony’s main entrance. Most of them carried small bags of belongings.

Feather and a few other Arbora waited for them down on the platform. Moon asked her, “Have you ever spent time with groundlings before?” He had suggested Feather be the one to take charge of Delin’s crew while they were here, to make sure they were comfortable and had access to food they could eat. Moon had chosen her because she was the only Arbora he felt he knew here. It also helped that she spoke enough Altanic to be able to communicate with them.

“No.” She smiled a little, glancing up at him. “It’ll be a good distraction, while we’re waiting.”

She meant waiting to see what the Fell would do. The court knew Malachite was acting on some sort of plan, but not the details. He said, “Hopefully it won’t be long.”

He shifted, and sprang up to catch hold of the boat’s railing. Below, Feather called out, “Be careful! We’ll see you in a few days!”

Moon swung down onto the deck and found himself facing Chime. “You’re going?” Chime stared. “I thought you were staying behind because you still needed to recover.”

“That’s what everybody thought,” Moon told him, and changed the subject before Chime could argue. “Where’s Celadon?”

Chime swallowed his objections with effort, and said, “Down in

the hull.”

Moon went down the steps and found Celadon in the large common room with Delin. They had a piece of the pressed reed the Islanders used as paper spread out on the table, and Delin was drawing a rough map to Aventura from Celadon’s directions.

As Moon walked in, Celadon glanced up, surprised to see him. Then she frowned. “We should be leaving soon. Did you come to see us off?”

“I changed my mind,” he said. “I’m coming with you.”

Making a notation on the map, Delin raised a brow. “There was a question? I assumed you had always intended to accompany us.”

Celadon eyed Moon a moment, then sighed. “I’d argue with you, but I know that’s like arguing with a rock and I have to save what’s left of my patience for the Aventureans. At least, unlike the warriors, I know you’re not afraid to fight Fell.” She ruined it by adding dryly, “And if you collapse, we’ve got Lithe with us.”

Moon decided not to succumb to the urge to protest his health. He sat on the edge of the table and studied the map. “Did someone come up with a story for the court about where Malachite and the others were going?”

“We said they were going to plan the attack on the Fell.” Celadon didn’t look particularly satisfied with the explanation.

“It’s not as if anyone in the court is going to believe anything else,” Moon pointed out. “Simple lies are always better.”

Celadon lifted her brows, possibly at this evidence that Moon knew a lot about the best way to lie convincingly. “I see.”

Fortunately, footsteps came down the stairs at that point and Lithe stepped into the doorway. She had her satchel slung over her shoulder and wore an extra shawl over her work clothes. She looked around the room, curious and a little uneasy. Moon realized this must be her first time to leave the area around the colony, let alone to be on a flying boat. He didn’t know what to say to make her feel more comfortable, so he just asked, “Ready to go?”

“Yes.” Lithe took a deep breath and managed a wan smile. Above their heads the deck creaked as more Raksura landed. Moon assumed it was Celadon’s warriors. Lithe started a little at the unaccustomed sound of people walking on the thin wood above her head, and said, “I didn’t expect it would be so... odd, to think of leaving the colony, even for a few days.”

Celadon told her, "It's brave of you. And if it works the way we hope, we'll know what brought the Fell here."

If it works the way we hope, Moon thought, and tried to suppress the urge to again mentally list everything that could go wrong.

Then someone dropped down the stairs and stepped into the doorway. It was a young queen about Celadon's size, with a slender build. Her scales were a light gold webbed with copper. She saw Moon first, and acknowledged him with a tilt of her head and an opaque expression. Moon thought at first he had never met her before, then realized he had seen her with Onyx. She must be one of the other Opal Night bloodline's daughter queens.

"Ivory," Celadon said, sounding suspiciously neutral. "We'll be leaving in a moment. Are your warriors aboard?"

"Yes. It's a very strange craft." She nodded politely to Delin. "This should be an interesting trip."

Ivory, Moon thought. The queen that Onyx had gotten UMBER to suggest as a possible match for Moon. Of all the things that could go wrong, that hadn't even occurred to him as a possibility.



Under Delin's direction, the warriors helped the flying boat cast off, while the Islander crew watched worriedly from the colony's landing platform.

As the ship lifted above the ridge surrounding the split colony tree, Moon managed to catch Celadon alone in the bow, out of earshot of the others. Before he could speak, she said, "We thought it was better to have two queens aboard, in case the Fell struck before we reached the others. I didn't know you planned to come. This is not my fault."

That invalidated most of what Moon had been about to say. He fell back on, "Does she know I turned her down?"

"Yes. And more importantly, she knows Malachite does not approve of her offer." Celadon hissed impatiently, then turned to wave to Delin in the steering cabin, indicating he should turn to the right more to avoid the branches of the standing portion of the tree. "You can't be afraid of her. You saw Malachite's reaction to Jade, the queen you want. What do you think she'd do to one who tried to touch you against your will? And besides that, I'm your clutchmate and I'm right here."

"I don't know how you can be my sister," Moon said. "You're so damn naive."

She showed her fangs. “Just let her get to know you, then she definitely won’t bother you.”

The boat successfully navigated the colony’s valley, and made its way into the sparse forest of mountain-trees and rock that marked the fringe of the Reaches. The afternoon and evening was occupied by avoiding obstacles and in teaching the warriors how to help Delin sail the boat. Chime and Root already knew quite a bit from their previous trips on wind-ships, Chime because he still had his mentor’s curiosity and Root because his memory, honed by keeping track of everything everyone had ever said in his hearing, was as good as a written book.

Balm was the only Indigo Cloud warrior who had accompanied Jade. Besides Chime, Root, Floret, and Song, ten Opal Night warriors had come along on the boat. Five of them had come with Celadon on their previous trip to the city, and they treated Moon with a combination of wariness and respect that made their company undemanding. The other five belonged to Ivory and were led by Saffron, the female warrior Moon had ordered off the flying boat. Moon reminded himself that he was getting what he wanted, another chance to tell the Aventerans how to fight the Fell, and objecting to the company was pointless.

None of the tasks aboard the boat were difficult for Raksura, who were physically stronger than the smaller Islanders and had no fear of falling, so Moon left them to it. He found a spot up in the bow, where he could sit on a cask tied off to the rail and watch the forest go by.

The flying boat’s steady but more leisurely speed allowed for close observation of everything they passed, and it was fascinating to be able to study the individual mountain-trees, their shapes, the flowers and the riot of vegetation on their platforms, and the life that occupied them. Since the trees were further apart here, more light reached the ground far below, so Moon had a better view of the rocky gullies and gorges, the different levels of the jungle deep within. And there were occasional intriguing glimpses of the creatures that lived down in the shadowy crevices.

After a while, Chime wandered up to the bow, leaned against Moon’s side, and sighed heavily. Moon asked, “Everything all right?”

“Yes. It’s just... the waiting.” Chime admitted reluctantly, “I’m afraid to see Fell again. Not that I’ve seen them as closely as you have. But... I’d rather not.”

A hesitant voice said, “What are they like?”

Moon glanced around and saw Lithe sitting on the deck a little distance away, her back against a support that helped anchor the

cables stretching up to the central mast. She had her shawl wrapped around her and looked forlorn. It was a strange question to hear her ask, and Moon and Chime must have had similar expressions. With a little asperity she added, "I may be half-Fell, but I've never seen one. Just drawings in books." She leaned forward. "Tell me. I don't want to be unprepared."

Chime said, "They're very frightening." He made an impatient gesture, as if annoyed with his own words. "That goes without saying, but... We all know there are a lot of things out there that want to kill us and eat us, but there's something different about Fell. Maybe it comes from being descended from the same species."

There was a lot Moon could say, but he decided to try to get across the most important point. "Fell don't just want to eat you, they want to own you. They act like they already do own you."

Lithe hugged herself a little tighter. Chime hunched his shoulders unhappily and cast an uneasy glance out at the shadows under the mountain-trees.

Moon continued, "Almost everything they say to you is a lie, and it probably won't be that hard for you to tell it's a lie. But it's worse when they tell you the truth." Moon felt Chime draw breath to ask a question, then let it out as he thought better of it. "Even if what they say is true, you can't let it matter to you. Don't let yourself be trapped by it."

Lithe's expression was intent. "I think I understand."

"You sound as if you discovered that the hard way," a new voice said.

It was Ivory, standing on the deck a few paces behind them. She was in her Arbora form, her head inclined at a thoughtful angle. Celadon was nowhere in sight.

Moon eased down off the water cask in case a quick escape was called for, but Ivory stayed where she was. Lithe was watching him expectantly, and Chime looked uncomfortable but curious. Moon hadn't intended to answer, but maybe Celadon was right: if Ivory got to know him better, she might lose interest. He said, "Before Indigo Cloud found me, I had never seen another Raksura. The first time I saw Fell, when they attacked a groundling city, I thought I might be one. So I asked one of the rulers if that was true."

Lithe hissed in dismay. Ivory's tail stirred in agitation, but she kept her voice under control as she asked, "And what did it say?"

"That I was a Fell." He let that hang in the air for a moment, then

said, “I didn’t believe it. I killed it to get away, but it shared the knowledge with other rulers before it died. The Fell followed me to Indigo Cloud, because they wanted to make more Raksuran crossbreeds.”

He was hoping Ivory would retreat in appalled horror, or say something that would make her disgust clear. Instead she just watched him thoughtfully. She said finally, “Thank you for telling me that.”

Damn it, Moon thought. He should have realized that being stalked by the Fell just wasn’t as shocking to the Raksura of Opal Night as it had been to Indigo Cloud. Before he could consider a precipitous retreat, Ivory said, “Lithe, I came up here to look for you. Celadon wants to speak to you about doing an augury.”

Lithe got to her feet and followed Ivory away toward the stern. Watching them, Chime said, “Celadon didn’t send another queen to fetch a mentor when there’s fourteen warriors on this boat with barely anything to do.” He added darkly, “She’s better at this than she seems. Be careful.”

“I know,” Moon muttered. He remembered Umber’s comment that Ivory would consider Moon a challenge; he had the feeling that this ostensibly subtle campaign might just be the first step. It had also belatedly occurred to him that Malachite might be enough of a strategist to express disapproval of Ivory’s proposal, both to lure Moon into a false sense of security and knowing that her approval would only make his resistance more stubborn. “It’s not going to work.” But he was very glad that Jade had come to Opal Night.



The flying boat had moved out of the fringe by the time the sky was starting to darken toward evening. The wind carried the rich scents of sweet grasses and a number of strange grasseaters.

As they crossed the plain, Moon saw a rock formation far ahead where bleached white pillars stretched up into arches, almost high enough to reach the boat’s hull, like the ribs of some giant creature. He hadn’t noticed it on their earlier trips back and forth across the plain, but they had come out of the fringe a little further to the north, and from so far above that the odd shape of the formation might not have been as apparent.

When they drew close enough for it to be visible to groundling eyes, Delin left Song in charge of the tiller and moved up to the railing beside Moon. That was when Moon realized the white shapes that looked like ribs were actually ribs. The ship was passing the skeletal remains of an enormous creature, collapsed and lying half-buried in

the vegetation covering the plain.

The boat grew quiet, everyone staring. The head and most of the body were buried in grass as tall as small trees. The ribs were each as wide as the flying boat, weathered and cracked. Moon spotted movement and his prey reflex made his whole body twitch. But the motion was a groundling who had used ropes and climbing spikes to scale one of the arching ribs.

The groundling had dark green fur and its body was shaped like a treeling, but it had a bag slung over its shoulder and hammered on the bone with an ax-like tool. Holes all over the ribs indicated this activity had been going on for some time. Mining, Moon realized, cutting into the bone for the dried marrow inside it. He saw more movement in the tangle of greenery at the skeleton's base; there must be more groundlings at work down there, maybe a camp, or some means to transport the marrow.

Astonished and caught unaware by the craft's silent approach, the climber stopped hammering to stare as the flying boat drew even with its position on the rib. It lifted its free hand hesitantly in greeting; Delin lifted a hand in return as the boat drifted past.

The groundling continued to stare after the boat, leaning down and angling its head for a better view of the underside of the hull. Moon watched it until the skeleton vanished into distance and twilight; it was a reminder that other peoples were depending on them to destroy this Fell flight, whether they knew it or not.

For her part, Ivory had scrupulously done nothing to annoy Moon or to pursue her interest with him. She never stood too close to him on deck, stepped aside to let him go through doorways first. This should have been reassuring, but it had the effect of making him acutely aware of her presence at all times. Moon didn't think it was unintentional.

Leaning against the rail, Celadon watched Moon regard Ivory with deep suspicion, and said in exasperation, "I don't know what Indigo Cloud is like, but neither Malachite nor Onyx would ever tolerate the kind of behavior you seem to expect from Ivory. We weren't raised that way."

Perversity made him ask, "Did Malachite beat you for misbehaving?"

"Hah. If you had to sit in front of her and Onyx, explaining exactly what you were thinking when you decided it was a good idea to pick a fight with one of your clutch cousins, you'd wish for a beating instead."

Moon found himself mentally storing that tactic away for use on Frost, and reminded himself his future at Indigo Cloud was anything but secure.

Night settled over the ship. They were close enough to the ground to hear the hum of the evening insects, but not close enough to be troubled by them. A wary Saffron brought an invitation for Moon and Celadon to eat with Ivory. Moon told Saffron he wasn't hungry and went to hide below decks.

Ivory's and Celadon's warriors had divided up the duties of the boat and of standing guard, so there wasn't much for the Indigo Cloud warriors to do. They all ended up with Moon in one of the smaller sleeping cabins.

"This is frustrating," Floret muttered, as she settled on the floor near the doorway. "They're doing all the work. We look like useless hangers-on."

"There's still the Fell to worry about," Song pointed out, as she pushed Root over to make room for her blanket. "If we're lucky, we'll have a chance to fight."

"You're both insane," Chime told them. "We'll be lucky if we never see a Fell again."

Moon agreed, but he didn't think it was likely to happen. There was more grumbling, and complaints, but eventually they all settled down. The wood of the deck was soft and springy, and it made a good bed. With Chime cuddled against him and surrounded by the others' familiar scents, sleep came quicker than Moon would have thought.

Sometime later Moon jolted awake, accidentally elbowing Chime. "Umf?" Chime asked, blearily.

Moon shushed him. None of the others had moved, but he could see Floret's eyes were open. Moon whispered, "Did you hear that?"

"Yes." Moving carefully, she pushed herself up on one elbow. "Something just below us?"

"I heard it too," Song whispered.

Root began, "I didn't—"

It happened again—Moon felt it more than heard it— a surreptitious scrape on the wood below. On the underside of the hull, he thought. Chime hissed. Moon leaned down close to the planks and took a deep breath, tasting the air. But the hull was too thick here and all he could scent was Raksura.

Moon pointed up to the deck and said softly, "Move quietly. One

at a time.” He climbed slowly to his feet. Stepping carefully around Chime, he picked his way silently across the floor to the doorway. He shifted, then scaled the doorframe to the ceiling, hooking his claws in the narrow bands of wood, and swung out into the hall. One of Ivory’s warriors, a big female named Fleet, was on guard in her shifted form, hanging from the doorway. “What—?” she started to ask.

“Quiet,” Moon hissed. “There’s something underneath the boat. Warn the others.” He climbed up the stairwell to the deck.

It was night; a cool breeze blew across the bow, scented of green grasses. There was no hint of Fell in it. Lamps hung on the bow and at the steering cabin. Delin, Celadon, and Lithe sat in its doorway, talking softly. Delin was making notes in one of his books. One of Celadon’s warriors crouched atop the cabin, keeping watch.

They glanced up as Moon appeared, and Celadon’s spines lifted as she sensed his tension. He crouched down beside her and said, low-voiced, “There’s something on the bottom of the hull. We heard it move.”

Celadon hissed under her breath and uncoiled to rise soundlessly to her feet. Lithe’s eyes widened and Delin calmly closed his book and pushed it inside the cabin door. Chime, Floret, and the other warriors crept quietly up from below. Ivory and her warriors followed.

Celadon motioned them all to come close, and whispered, “Ivory, take your warriors out along that side of the boat and get ready to climb down. My warriors come with me.”

Moon started to follow Celadon, but she added, “Moon, stay with Lithe.”

Moon grimaced, but obeyed, retreating to the cabin. Lithe stood in the doorway, bouncing nervously. “Do you scent Fell?” she asked. “I can’t.”

Moon shook his head. “No. It may be something else.”

Chime, Floret, Song, and Root gathered around the cabin, all shifted and braced for trouble. It was a clear night and the moon was nearly full, silver light shining down on grassland broken by clumps of rock, some wrought by weather into smooth rounded shapes, like the towers of a ruined city. Several flying islands of various sizes dotted the sky above, their shapes blotting out the stars. Moon had a flash of memory, of the furred groundling hanging from the giant rib bone, leaning down to peer under the ship’s hull. He cursed under his breath. It wasn’t just curious, it saw something down there.

“What?” Chime whispered nervously.

“Nothing,” Moon said. Then he heard Celadon’s voice, getting louder as she climbed up the side of the boat. “...You little idiot! I can’t believe this!” She swung herself over the rail onto the deck. “What is Malachite going to say to you? What is she going to say to me?”

A dark shape followed her, and Moon heard rather than saw it shift. Then another familiar voice said, “It’s not your fault.”

Shade. Moon clapped a hand over his eyes and hissed. Malachite was going to go insane. They would be lucky if she didn’t order them all back to the colony the instant she saw him.

Chime said, “Him? Uh-oh.”

Lithe said, glumly, “Oh, this isn’t good. Malachite is going to be very upset.”

“No kidding,” Moon muttered.

“But who is this?” Delin asked, peering into the darkness.

As Lithe explained who Shade was, Moon shifted to groundling and went to the group at the railing.

The warriors gathered around as Celadon demanded, “What did you think you were doing?”

“I wanted to help.” Shade sounded embarrassed, at least. He was in his groundling form now and had clearly prepared for the trip with a small pack over one shoulder. This hadn’t been a last moment impulse, then. He said, “Hello, Moon,” and added to Celadon, “I’ll make sure Malachite knows it was all my idea.”

Sounding grim, Ivory said, “When Malachite sees you, she might order us all back to the colony.”

Shade protested, “She won’t. This is a good plan. She won’t stop it just because I’m here.”

Celadon folded her arms. “Sure of that, are you?”

“Yes.” It could have seemed arrogant, but coming from Shade it just sounded earnest and naive.

Ivory’s spines rippled in annoyance. “We can send him home with an escort of warriors.”

“You need all the warriors with you,” Shade told her. “Besides, I won’t go.”

There was general hissing and spine-flicking from everyone standing around, but no one disputed the point, and no one seemed to know what to do. It was clear from Shade’s behavior, and the

reactions of the queens and warriors, that he hadn't done anything requiring rebuke since he had left the nurseries. Obviously Malachite's potential wrath wasn't threat enough to force him to go back to the colony.

Moon had had enough, and didn't see any use in continuing to argue. He said, "Shade, let's go down to the cabins and talk." He caught Shade's wrist and hauled him out of the circle of queens and warriors.

Shade meekly followed him down the stairs, but once they were in the belowdecks passage, he asked, "Are you angry with me?"

Moon stopped in the doorway to the sleeping cabin. He didn't want a half-Fell half-brother who seemed determined to force the relationship which they had had for all of a few days, but he was stuck with one, and there seemed no way out of it now. And Shade was sheltered and innocent, and yet seemed to have no illusions about what he was. He said, "Yes."

Shade followed Moon into the cabin, and managed to look contrite, though it appeared to be an effort. He had dressed in a plain, dark-colored shirt and pants of the same light material used for work clothes for hunters and warriors. The small pack he carried couldn't have held much food, but he had at least left his good jewelry at home, and wore only a copper bracelet and an anklet with copper and ivory disks. He said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry you did this?" Moon folded his arms. "I don't think so."

Shade didn't argue that. He offered, "I'm sorry everyone's upset."

Moon hissed under his breath. "If Malachite sends us all home, will you be sorry for that?"

"She won't!"

"You don't know that."

"But the trap is better this way." Shade seemed utterly certain of this. "It may not be Lithe the Fell want at all. It may be me."

"That's exactly what Malachite is afraid of."

Shade appeared to at least consider this, looking a little troubled, but he didn't volunteer to return to the colony. "I was hanging onto the bottom of the boat all day. Can I have something to eat?"

Moon gave in. "Come on," he said wearily, and took Shade to the main cabin for food.

By dawn they had an escort, one of the flying bladder-boats. It was a fairly big one, with several balconies built out from its boat-shaped cabin, possibly for firing weapons. No one shot at them or appeared in any of the doorways, but Moon spotted several faces peering at them through the glass windows.

“It’s a primitive contraption.” Delin studied it through a copper spyglass. “I wonder how they steer it.”

“With great difficulty?” Chime suggested, leaning on the railing beside Delin.

“At least they aren’t trying to stop us,” Moon said. The occupants of the bladder-boat had to know the Raksura were returning; several of the warriors in their winged forms perched on the cabin roof, the railings, or up on the lookout post atop the mast.

Moon looked toward the bow, where Celadon, Ivory, and Shade stood. Just coming into view was the seated statue carved out of the plateau, the lake at its feet, and other bladder-boats making their slow way toward it. Shade gripped the railing, his whole body language expressing rapt attention. At least he’s enjoying it, Moon thought, still feeling a little sour about the whole situation.

The wind grew gusty and strong as they drew near the city, and Delin ordered the warriors to help him close up and fasten the sails. Depending on the lines of force that crossed the Three Worlds, the ship was less at the mercy of the wind than the Averterans’ bladder-boats. But it could still be torn apart in a bad storm, and the harsh gusts made it difficult to maneuver.

An Averteran, wrapped up in a heavy coat, stepped out onto one of the bladder-boat’s balconies and shouted at them in Kedaic, telling them where to land. Since flying boats didn’t actually land on the ground, this could be a problem. Grumbling under his breath, Delin sent Chime to the steering cabin for something he called a speaking tube, which turned out to be a cone that amplified the voice somewhat when you shouted through it.

Leaning over the rail to look at the platform the Averteran had indicated, Moon asked, “Can you even get the boat down there?”

“Eventually.” With an air of dissatisfaction, Delin examined the spot with his spyglass. “They have some hooks and rings for tying off their own craft. I would have to drop the anchor blocks, tie off to secure them, and then winch the ship down.” He lowered the spyglass and frowned. “It would be easier if we tied off at this level and one of you flew me over to a balcony.”

Celadon and Ivory had come over to listen. Celadon said, "Tell them that. Depending on the conversation we have, we may not be staying long."

Delin took the speaking tube from Chime and conducted an argument with the bladder-boat. Finally it gave in and they were directed to a broad, relatively sheltered balcony just below the right shoulder of the giant statue.

As Delin maneuvered the boat closer, Moon saw several Aventerans appear on the balcony. He recognized Ennia, but Havram was absent. Hopefully that was a good sign. From their grim expressions, none of the Aventerans were particularly glad to see them.

Ivory studied the balcony with a faint frown. "Should I come with you?" she asked Celadon.

"No. I'll take my warriors, Moon, and Delin. And no, not you, Shade," she added as he opened his mouth to object. "You're here against my will and without Malachite's permission, and I have no intention of rewarding you with a tour of a groundling city."

Shade subsided and at least looked a little chastened.

Lithe hunched her shoulders in a spine-settling gesture that looked odd on her slim groundling form. "Be careful. They don't look friendly."

"Did you ever have any auguries?" Celadon asked her.

"No." Lithe's expression was a mix of annoyance and disappointment. "I tried twice last night, and again this morning. All I can see is danger from the Fell, nothing certain. It's blotting out everything else like a huge thundercloud."

That wasn't encouraging.

"Just watch the tiller, and make certain nothing jars it, and all should be well," Delin told Chime. Delin had chosen him to be in charge of the boat while he was gone, and Moon had chosen Floret to make certain Ivory's warriors listened to Chime and to enforce any commands he gave.

Two warriors carried the lines over to the balcony to secure the boat and keep it from drifting away, then Moon took Delin and flew across with Celadon and her warriors.

Ennia nodded gravely to them and led them through an arched doorway into a large room. It didn't look like it was meant for meetings or even for sitting in comfort. The walls and floor were all

polished stone, and there were no rugs or furniture. It was lit by one of the arrays of small glowing balls that hung from the ceiling, and two more open doorways led to a hall, which drew the air in off the open balcony and through the room. The cool draft couldn't be very comfortable for the Aventerans.

Ennia seemed to feel all the awkwardness of the situation. "Celadon, after our last... I did not think you would come again. And in such a strange craft." She looked almost warily at Delin.

Celadon kept her expression and her voice even and neutral. "It belongs to our friend, Delin-Evran-lindel, a scholar of the Golden Isles. He wishes to speak to you."

Ennia nodded politely to Delin, but her expression was doubtful. "You are not..."

"A shapeshifter?" he said. "No, merely a friend to the Raksura."

One of the other Aventerans said, "Being a friend to the Raksura seems to attract danger from other creatures, like the Fell." Moon recognized him as Livan, the Aventerans' shaman, or archimaster as Havram had called him. And Livan was being free with his opinions, considering until a few days ago he hadn't heard of the Fell at all.

Delin eyed him thoughtfully, like Livan was a student who might possibly be worth the effort to instruct. He said, "Why do you say that? From what I understand, you are no friend to the Raksura, having ordered them out of your city after they rescued a child from a Fell ruler."

Celadon flicked a spine, startled. Possibly because this was what she had wanted to say, and was surprised Delin had said it for her.

Ennia frowned at Livan, but Livan said, stiffly, "If they had never come to our city, the ruler would never have tried to injure the child."

"No," Delin admitted. "It would have hid among you until it was time to call down the others, attack your city, destroy it, and eat all your children, followed by all yourselves."

There was an uneasy stir in the room, as if a wind colder than the draft from the balcony had blown through. Livan started to answer, but swallowed the words. No one argued. Something happened, Moon thought. After we left, something else happened. Maybe they would be willing to listen after all.

Delin must have expected a rebuttal, but didn't let himself be thrown off course when it didn't come. He continued, "I am from the Golden Isles, a small nation to the east, in what is often called the Yellow Sea. The court of Indigo Cloud once drove off an attempt by

the Fell to assault our city, so we owe the Raksura our safety and continued existence.”

Celadon looked startled, as well she might, and was probably wondering why Moon hadn’t mentioned this to her before. Moon managed to keep his expression serious, though it was an effort. And people think I’m a liar. Delin wasn’t exactly lying, but exaggerating massively. He had made the incident sound like a Fell flight had descended on the Golden Isles with the intent to feed on the city, and had been driven off by a Raksuran court. Instead, one Fell ruler on an enslaved cloud-walker had followed Moon, Jade, and the warriors there, and had attacked the harbor when they arrived. The attack had ceased when Jade had killed the ruler.

But Ennia didn’t seem reassured by Delin’s version of the incident. Her expression tightened, as if she was suppressing some strong emotion. She said, in a low voice, “I see. You must have been very grateful.”

“Yes. One is, in such circumstances.” Delin seemed as puzzled by her reaction as Moon was. Persisting, he said, “The Fell are insidious creatures. In the lands to the east and the Abascene Peninsula, they are like the powerful storms that come in from the oceans, unpredictable, deadly, and inevitable. It is their nature to be predators, and parasites. You must understand that everything they do and say, everything they are, is bent toward that end. It is all they know.”

Ennia’s mouth set in a thin line, and there was despair in her expression. “I am beginning to realize that is true.”

Celadon’s eyes narrowed. She demanded, “What is it? What happened after we left?”

Ennia stepped back, and said, “I’m sorry.”

Moon heard a yell from somewhere outside and swung around in time to see an object like a dark cloud shoot through the air and strike the flying boat. The boat swayed over from the weight, but didn’t capsize. As it righted, Moon realized the object was a giant net. He hissed, to a chorus of shocked and angry growls from the warriors. Then a howl that sent a chill right through him shattered the air.

It was a major kethel.

Chapter Sixteen

Celadon rounded on Ennia with a snarl. “You’ll regret this.”

“I regret it now, but they took hostages,” Ennia said, still backing away. The other Aventerans scattered, some ran out of the room. “We had no choice.”

Celadon showed her fangs. “They’ll kill you all.”

“Fools!” Delin shouted, furious. “You could have spoken to us, warned us, we could have helped you—”

It’ll be dakti first, not rulers, Moon thought, looking frantically around. The rulers would know a queen was here and wouldn’t want to fight her until she had been worn down by the dakti. And they couldn’t count on Ivory and the others escaping the net that held the flying boat in time to help. He couldn’t scent anything, but then the room had been chosen for the draft of air blowing into the city, preventing them from detecting the Fell taint. Livan was the only Aventeran who hadn’t fled; he remained near Ennia, and he had lifted his hands and spoke in a soft voice.

Moon realized abruptly what that meant and flung himself forward. He rammed into Livan before the shaman could finish whatever magic he was making. Livan fell backward and struck the floor, and his head banged into the hard paving. Moon bounced to his feet as Celadon said, “This way!”

One of the warriors grabbed Delin and they bounded out into the hall. It was wide, with a few Aventerans huddled against the curving walls. One end was open to a stairwell, the other blocked by a set of closed doors.

Moon still couldn’t scent anything amid the confusing drafts, but he heard distinctive movement in the stairwell, the rush of leathery wings, the clack of claws. That would be the dakti swarm heading toward them. “They’re above us,” he said to Celadon.

She sprang to the doors. “We’ll try to go down and out. Remember the cargo shafts have openings to the outside.” She looked at the warriors. “Whoever makes it out, fly to the island to warn Malachite. Rime, hold onto the groundling.”

The warriors growled in grim assent. Delin wrapped his hands

firmly around Rime's collar flanges. "Don't worry about me. Just go."

Celadon jerked at the door handle, found it locked, and ripped the door off the wall.

She plunged out into the hall beyond, Moon and the warriors following. They slammed through a dozen Aventeran guards who must have been placed there to block their escape, then dove down a short stairway.

They bounded through a confusing maze of corridors, mostly unoccupied. They passed several startled groundlings, who were insane to be out in the halls instead of hiding inside locked rooms. But there had been activity out on the bladder-boat dock, on the balconies, and other bladder-boats in the air. I wonder how much of the city knows about the Fell trap, Moon thought, bouncing off a wall as he and Celadon careened around a corner. If Ennia and Havram and the other leaders hadn't warned anyone, if the inhabitants of the city were unprepared... The Aventerans were going to pay for this, but it wouldn't be the Raksura who exacted the price.

The Fell stench was in the air now, too much of it to tell a direction. Ahead the corridor opened into a large chamber, a market or gathering area like the one they had seen on their last visit here. Past Celadon, Moon glimpsed daylight coming through a line of pillars. But an instant later a dark shape blocked it and he saw scaled wings rise up. We're dead, it's a kethel, he thought, just as Celadon halted and snapped her wings out to stop the warriors, snarling, "Back the other way!"

Moon turned and found himself temporarily in the lead as the warriors followed him back down the corridor. He took the other turn, a hall that ran parallel to the cliff face. It was narrow enough that the kethel couldn't follow them without shifting to groundling, but it wasn't likely to take them to an opening to the outside. Celadon leapt over the heads of the warriors and landed next to him to take the lead again. She glanced at him, but didn't speak. There wasn't anything to say.

The hall turned again, toward the cliff face, but it ended in what at first looked like an empty room. Then Moon saw the heavy chains hanging down the walls and his heart leapt. "Cargo lift!"

He looked up to see a square of daylight a few hundred paces up the shaft. Celadon said, "Hurry, climb!"

They started up the chains, Moon, Celadon, and a warrior on one side, the other three warriors and Delin on the other. Delin held on to Rime unsupported, so Rime could use both hands to climb. Delin's

face was set in a grimace of determination, and Moon was terrified he would fall. Even if it was a quick end compared to what the Fell would do to him.

Celadon whispered, “The dakti haven’t found us yet. They should be right behind us. They were trying to drive us into that kethel and they would have, if it hadn’t shifted too soon.”

She was right. “Maybe they got turned around in a corridor,” Moon said, but he knew it was unlikely. “Or they’re waiting for something, another kethel to trap us—”

The wall chains shook and something heavy groaned ominously. Above them the blocky shape of a cargo platform jolted into motion, blotting out the square of daylight as it creaked down the shaft. Celadon looked down and hissed. “That’s what they were waiting for!”

Moon looked and saw a black cloud of leathery wings, tails, claws, and teeth; the dakti swarmed up the shaft toward them like a dark wave.

There was no time to discuss it, no time to plan. Celadon swung over to one of the shaking wall chains that helped balance the moving platform. She ripped it out of the ring that held it to the wall and flung herself backward across the shaft. As the startled warrior flattened himself to the wall, Moon swung around and ripped out another supporting ring. The platform above jerked and flipped sideways amid a chorus of metallic snaps and ringing as the chains on the other wall took the full weight and broke.

Moon caught a passing slap from a chain that slammed him face-first into the wall. Dazed, he felt his claws lose their grip, but the warrior grabbed his arm and pulled him in as the wooden platform plunged past them.

The square window was right above them now, and the warrior dragged Moon up onto the sill. Moon crouched, blinked hard to clear his bleary vision, and looked down the shaft in time to see several dakti scrambling up the wall toward them. He slashed the first one across the face and throat; it tumbled backward but more followed. The warrior shouted at him to jump. Moon turned, and he and the warrior leapt out the window into a strong gust of wind.

Moon caught a glimpse of the flying boat, but for a few heartbeats he was too occupied with fighting to stay aloft to realize what he was looking at. Then details came into focus and he went cold with horror.

A major kethel clung to the carved cliff face above the flying boat’s anchorage, its claws hooked into the balconies and around the

elegant pillars of the city's façade. The giant creature's form was similar to the dakti, armored-plated in the same way, but it had an array of horns crowning its huge head. It couldn't be the one they had glimpsed inside the city; it was the biggest kethel Moon had ever had the misfortune to see, more than three times Stone's size. It loomed over the flying boat, which was still wrapped in the folds of netting. He couldn't see any movement on the deck.

"The others didn't follow us!" the warrior called out above him. "Consort, you go on, I'll wait—" The words dissolved in a sharp cry and the warrior folded and dropped like a rock. Something had struck him; the scent of blood came to Moon as he twisted sideways and grabbed the falling man's outstretched arm.

The warrior's dead weight jerked Moon down and he flapped hard to stay aloft, but the wind tossed him toward the cliff. He looked down, saw the warrior had shifted to groundling from shock and pain; blood stained his shirt on the right side of his chest. Projectile weapon, Moon thought with a snarl. He looked around and spotted a bladder-boat suspended in the air some distance away and headed rapidly toward them.

Moon pulled the warrior up into his arms, let the wind shove him sideways, and angled for a steep dive away from the city.

He heard the faint pop from the direction of the bladder-boat, twisted, and dropped to avoid another projectile. But a soft weight struck him and knocked him toward the cliff face.

Moon slammed into the rock, stunned, and felt his wings twist with the weight of whatever had hit him. Keeping hold of the warrior with one arm, he grabbed for purchase on the rock with the other. He caught a hold in the stone with his foot-claws and realized the thing that had hit them was a net made of heavy cord, a smaller version of the one that had trapped the flying boat. He ripped at it with his free hand but his claws slid off the metallic strands, and the entangling folds dragged painfully at his wings. He wrapped his free arm around an ornamental post projecting from a ledge and shifted to groundling just as he felt the bones in his wings bend.

He gasped as the pressure on his wings disappeared and his groundling body formed. He waited for the rush of pain from broken bones but it didn't come. The net's weight, his heavier body, and the warrior combined to strain his arm and shoulder, until it felt as if the joint was about to rip apart. But that was all. Just in time, he thought in relief. Broken wing bones would have translated to broken bones in his back, and the terror of that ran through his veins like icy water.

The bladder-boat had been too far away for a groundling to throw the net, so it must have somehow shot it at them like a projectile. That explains where the net that hit the boat came from, he thought.

The warrior regained consciousness enough to wrap his good arm around Moon's neck. The scent of his blood was thick in Moon's throat. He whispered, "Consort, what..."

"Just hold on." Moon twisted as far as he could, ignoring the grinding pain in his shoulder. Ropes stretched up from the net towards the bladder-boat, still above them and coming down at an angle, now no more than a hundred paces away. They needed to get untangled from this net so Moon could shift and get them out of here. "What's your name?"

"Dare," the warrior gasped.

"Dare, can you kick the net away from—" Groundlings appeared at the bladder-boat's railing and one lifted a bulky weapon with a long tube. And we need to get away now, Moon thought. He told Dare, "Don't let go."

The warrior tightened his grip. Moon lifted his legs despite the tangling net, braced his feet on the wall, and shoved off.

They fell until the ropes attached to the net caught and jerked them to a halt. Moon tore and dragged at the clinging folds and Dare kicked out. Moon felt the net loosen as it started to untangle, about to spill them out.

Then something dark closed around them.

Moon saw the huge claws arching over him and realized the major kethel had snatched them up in its hand. Dare strangled back a scream but in the next instant the creature dropped them.

They slammed into a wooden surface. Dare landed hard on Moon's chest and knocked the air out of him. Moon got a breath into his aching lungs and quelled the panicked impulse to shift. The net was wrapped around his arm and neck, half-strangling him; it would be worse tangled on his spines and folded wings.

Dare gasped and choked. Moon managed to roll half over, easing the warrior to the side and taking some of the weight of the net off him. He was young, with light bronze skin and red-brown hair; he trembled violently from blood loss, his skin cold. Blood soaked his light-colored shirt, and Moon could feel it, slick and warm on his arms and chest.

Moon snarled and looked up. The kethel had dropped them on one of the open decks of the bladder-boat. The huge air bladder hung

overhead and the rounded wall of a cabin was to one side. Two Aventeran groundlings stared down at them. Both were male, bundled up in knits and leather coats against the wind streaming over the deck, and both were armed with smaller projectile weapons. The stink of Fell clung to the wood. Moon bared his teeth.

One of the groundlings flinched and lifted his weapon. The other grabbed the barrel and pushed it away. "No, they're wounded," he said in Kedaic. It wasn't until that moment that Moon realized it was Havram.

Dare curled up against Moon's chest and Moon pulled him closer. He was dying; Moon could smell it. He grated out, "Why did you do this? We were trying to help you."

The other groundling stared, as if he hadn't expected Moon to be able to talk. Havram said, "We had no choice."

Moon felt a footstep vibrate through the wooden boards, just before he sensed a Fell ruler. Dare whimpered and curled tighter into Moon's chest.

A Fell ruler in groundling form stepped into view, looking down at them. He resembled Ivades in that he was tall and slim, his skin white as the palest marble, and the long hair tossed by the wind was dark and fine. But the gravity of his presence stopped Moon's breath. This ruler was as old and powerful as Ivades had been young and foolish. Moon had never seen him before; it was a small relief, at least, that this ruler was not one of those he had seen with Ranea's flight.

In Raksuran, because Fell always spoke the language of their prey, the ruler said, "Are you hurt?"

Moon hissed. "What does it look like?"

The ruler tilted his head at the groundlings and said in Kedaic, "You injured them."

The other groundling said, "They were about to escape. I had to fire on them."

Havram added, "This is what you wanted. Now take them and go."

The ruler shifted, the effect different from a Raksuran, as if its body became liquid and flowed into the new shape. Its shifted form was larger than Ivades' had been, its armored crest more prominent. It said, "So we shall go."

It snapped out a clawed hand and slashed Havram's head off, slapped the weapon out of the second man's hand, caught him by the

front of his jacket and slung him over the rail of the deck. Screaming erupted from the cabin behind Moon, then just as abruptly ceased. The ruler flicked the blood off its claws and said to Moon, "These creatures taste like carrion. They're no use at all."

The kethel's hand swooped down again and snatched Moon and Dare off the deck. Moon would have screamed if he had time to gasp a breath; a heartbeat later he realized the kethel hadn't crushed them. It was carrying them somewhere. The vibration of its powerful wingbeats traveled through the muscles of its arm.

The hand enclosing them shut out all but a little light shining through narrow gaps between the kethel's claws. A little cool air leaked in, just enough to keep them from smothering in the sickening heat and stench of the creature's skin. The net ground into Moon's back and shoulders, and had to be exerting painful pressure on Dare's wounds. Moon whispered, "It's all right, try to hold on," then felt Dare's death rattle as the last breath left his lungs.

The kethel flew for some endless time. Moon fought down fear that threatened to choke him, forced himself not to struggle against the cooling weight of Dare's body. If these Fell had the same plans as the ones who had stalked Indigo Cloud...

Finally the kethel landed, and Moon heard wind moving over rock, and less identifiable sounds. Then the slivers of light dimmed and altered, and he felt the kethel lean forward.

Its claws opened and Moon and Dare's body spilled out and landed on a hard surface.

Dazed, bruised, and sticky with Dare's blood, Moon tried to push himself up. He had been dropped on the deck of Delin's flying boat; he recognized the color and texture of the wood. But the air was stale and thick, as if it had already been breathed once, and so heavy with the scent of Fell stench it was like trying to inhale dirt. He blinked hard to clear his vision, but there was nothing wrong with his eyes. The light was tinted a murky gray-red, as if it was falling through a piece of gut. Moon managed to roll half over and get a look at what was above the flying boat.

At first he thought it was a fog, or a heavily clouded sky. It was oddly mottled, thick, reddish-gray. Realizing what it was, he hissed in despair.

It was the inside of a sac, one of the containers made from the secretions of the kethel. From the fact that it was more than large enough to contain the flying boat, it must be the giant sac that Stone had seen. His eyes caught movement in the dimness and he saw dakti

swarmed over the inside of it, working on a tear in the surface. The kethel must have had to open a slit to deposit Moon on the boat.

Moon pushed away from Dare's body and tore at the net. Figures leaned over him, pulling at the cords; he flinched and snarled before he realized it was Floret and Chime and Saffron. They untangled the net, and Moon shook their hands off and shoved to his feet. Before Moon could speak, Chime shifted to groundling and flung himself into Moon's arms. Moon stumbled, but stayed upright. Chime clutched him like a lifeline and sobbed once into his shoulder. Saffron crouched down to touch Dare's face, then hissed in dismay as she realized he was dead.

They stood on the deck near the steering cabin. The interior of the sac was vast and murky, the air too warm and humid, laced with drifting mist. Supports like leafless branches crossed the vast space, made of more of the hardened secretion. The whole space was moving, the boat swaying a little with the force of the sac's motion, nudged along with it by bumping against the supports. Moon's sense of direction told him they were heading northwest, away from Aventura and the plateau, away from the Reaches.

Other shapes hung in the dimness; Moon caught a glimpse of something huge, like a flying island, but it was wrapped in some web-like secretion. Whatever it was, it looked horrible. Patting Chime's back, Moon asked Floret and Saffron, "Who's dead?"

"Horn is dead." Saffron named one of the Opal Night warriors, her gaze still on Dare. Both she and Floret were wounded, with scratches and tears in their scales. "Ivory is hurt, badly."

Moon growled a curse. "Who else is hurt?"

"Gallant, Tribute, and Fleet. And the younger ones, from Indigo Cloud—"

"Root and Song," Floret supplied. "The Fell could have killed us all, but they stopped when Ivory went down."

Saffron faced Moon, her spines flicking with anxiety. "Celadon and the others?"

"I don't know. If they got away, I didn't see them." Moon took Chime by the shoulders and moved him away. Chime had bruises on his face, his neck, dark stains on his bronze skin. "Let's get below."

Saffron gathered up Dare's body and started toward the stairs. In the doorway, Moon stopped Chime and let Floret and Saffron get ahead of them. He whispered, "What did Shade and Lithe do in the fight?"

Chime answered hurriedly, "I didn't see. They were on the other end of the ship with Ivory and Saffron and the other Opal Night warriors. But they both had blood on their hands and teeth afterward, so they must have shifted to fight."

Good. Moon started down the steps.

All the lamps belowdecks had burned out, but bits of cloth that had been spelled to make light were stuffed into the sconces. In a cabin on the other side of the passage, Saffron placed Dare carefully down next to the crumpled body of another young warrior.

The air was heavy with blood and sickness, detectable even over the stench of Fell. As Moon stepped into the main cabin, he found the wounded laid out on blankets on the floor at the far end of the room. He moved toward them, looking for Root and Song, sick at the thought of what he might see.

The warriors were all in their groundling forms, all deeply unconscious, their clothes bloody from the cuts that had rent their scales and transferred to their skin when they shifted. Root had a bad slash stretching from his collarbone down his left side. His eyes were deeply sunken in their sockets, his features sharpened as if the flesh had thinned and tightened. Except for the slow, almost imperceptible movement of his chest, he looked dead. Song was worse, slashed across the neck. Blood matted her curling hair, trickled down from the corner of her mouth.

Ivory was still awake, Shade supporting her head, Lithe kneeling next to her. Moon took one look at Shade's face and gave up his last suspicion. Shade's expression was set with shock, his eyes all pupil, his light skin so pale it was almost translucent. He looked like Flower had before she died.

Lithe's eyes were wide, frightened, as if the effort of holding back panic was almost too much. She said, "Moon." Her voice was thick with relief. "We thought—We were afraid—Is Celadon—?"

"We don't know about the others yet," Floret told her.

Moon knelt next to Ivory. "They're all in a healing sleep?"

"Yes." Lithe touched Ivory's forehead. Moon could see the effort it cost her to pretend to be calm. "I need to send her into one, but she won't let me."

Ivory's scent was bitter and coppery with blood, and her collarbone was broken. She was in her Arbora form, so there was no telling what damage had been done to her wings. Her scales were scratched and torn, the fingers of her right hand smashed, her claws

broken.

She opened her eyes and focused on Moon. Her voice grating with pain, she said, "Where's Celadon?"

As she spoke, he saw she still had blood on her fangs. "Either dead or free, flying to Malachite and the others."

With her good hand she reached over and squeezed his wrist, hard enough for his bones to grind together. "I hope everything they said about you was true."

Me, too, Moon thought. What he wanted to do was huddle in a corner and quietly panic, or loudly panic, but he couldn't afford to.

She raised her voice enough to say, "Saffron. Until I wake, obey this consort as if his words are mine."

Saffron gave Moon a wary glance, but said, "I will, Ivory."

Ivory sank back against Shade and closed her eyes. Shade made a frightened sound, like a fledgling.

Biting her lip in concentration, Lithe put a hand on Ivory's brow. Ivory's body gradually relaxed, her breathing grew even and slow, the lines of pain on her face smoothed away. Lithe sighed at the effort and rubbed her eyes. "I don't know if she'll live. She has a chance, if—" She cut the words off.

If the Fell leave her alone, Moon thought. They might all be dead in the next few moments.

As Lithe and Shade laid Ivory down on the blanket, Moon got to his feet. He looked around and realized the others were staring at him. Right, he was in charge. To get his thoughts in order more than anything else, he said, "The Fell knew we were coming here, knew about the trap."

Lithe sat back and pushed the sweaty hair off her face. "But how? The crossbreeds, I know what you think, but we didn't—"

"That's not what I think," Moon interrupted.

Chime said, "You think this is the same thing that happened at Indigo Cloud." He folded his arms tightly and his voice trembled a little, but he didn't look as bad as Shade. "That these Fell have crossbreeds of their own, a mentor-dakti who guided them here."

"It would explain a lot." Experimentally, Moon shifted to his winged form, then back to groundling. "But we can still shift."

"Or maybe they just haven't bothered with us yet," Chime said, and glanced nervously up at the deck.

Saffron, Lithe, and Shade all followed his gaze.

Floret paced to the doorway and stood so she could watch the stairs. "It is like what happened to us. The way they knew we were going to the groundling city, what we were going to do. But why attack Opal Night, one of the strongest courts in the Reaches?"

"Maybe revenge against Malachite, for destroying a Fell flight," Chime told her. "Like they wanted revenge against Moon, for killing a ruler."

Saffron turned her head to stare at Moon, incredulous. Moon guessed Ivory hadn't repeated anything he had said to her in the bow yesterday. That made him feel even worse about what had happened to her.

"It also doesn't explain why we're going northwest," Shade said tentatively. He still looked shaky, but maybe trying to solve the puzzle of what had happened and why was helping him stay calm. "If they want to attack Opal Night, why are they heading away from it?"

"That's a good question." Moon wished they had an answer to it. "Are there any courts in this direction? Or another groundling city?"

"No courts that we know of." Saffron frowned in thought. "I never heard of any groundling cities, but that doesn't mean they aren't there."

"They've just had a groundling city, though," Chime said. "Why didn't they stay longer at Aventera?"

"They didn't seem interested in it," Moon admitted reluctantly. "It was like they came for us, caught us, and forgot about the groundlings."

They all digested that unpleasant thought for a moment. Lithe said slowly, "I think... This doesn't change anything. I think we were right, all along, that the Fell came here for crossbreeds. But they just needed one or two of us. Now that they have Shade and me, they don't need to attack Opal Night anymore."

Chime hunched his shoulders uneasily. "She may be right."

Shade looked even more sick. "But why do they want us?"

Moon didn't think they were going to like the answer to that question, whatever it was. It might mean these Fell wanted more Raksura for breeding, but in that case it seemed strange that they had settled for only two crossbreeds and one full Raksuran consort. He didn't want to think about it, and he didn't want the others to think about it. They had to focus on getting out of here. "Chime, do you

know if Delin has anything on this boat we can use? Like weapons?”

Before Chime could answer, Saffron snorted. “We have weapons. Our claws.”

Moon wasn’t in the mood for any backtalk from warriors, but before he could explain that and include a demonstration, Lithe said sharply, “Saffron, don’t be stupid. He means groundling weapons. Like something that shoots projectiles, or makes things catch on fire.”

From the doorway, Floret gave Saffron’s back a withering look.

Shade stood up straight, enthusiasm making his voice stronger. “If we could set the sac on fire and get the boat out...” He saw the flaw in the plan. “But the boat is too slow. The kethel would just catch us again and kill us.”

Lithe hesitated, as if reluctant to voice her thought, but she said, “It might be better if we forced them to kill us. Before they have a chance to do whatever it is that they captured us to do.”

Moon couldn’t argue with that. Floret nodded grimly, Chime looked sick, and Saffron frustrated. Moon thought Saffron wanted to argue, or hated the idea of using groundling weapons, but she knew that Lithe was right.

Shade huddled in on himself again, but said, “Setting the sac on fire is a good idea. We have to stop them, or they’ll just attack Opal Night for more crossbreeds.”

Chime cleared his throat. “I don’t know if Delin has any weapons onboard. But we can look.”



Moon had Lithe, Shade, and Chime go through the other cabins, while the two warriors kept watch. He searched the main cabin and the hold himself, but all he found that might be useful were some knives and other sharp implements, for cooking or for working on the boat. The food and water stores were still good, so at least they would be able to eat and care for the wounded right up until the Fell killed them.

He had finished and was in the main cabin when Chime returned with something he and Lithe had found.

It was a metal projectile weapon, with a long tube attached to a handle, and a lever. Chime pointed to various bits of it. “I think you use the lever to pump air into this part of it, and then when you pull this, that makes the air release and that shoots out the projectile. I found some of these—” He set a box down on the table. It was filled

with round little packages wrapped in paper. “I think they’re the projectiles. But I’ve been thinking, Delin never mentioned he had a weapon that would be useful against the Fell. And this was packed up in a cabinet in his sleeping room, and not up in the steering cabin where he could get to it quickly. So maybe it’s not a weapon, it just looks like one?”

Moon picked up one of the projectiles, handling it carefully. It felt soft, like sand wrapped in heavy paper, and it had a wick like a candle. He tried it against the opening in the weapon, and it slid right inside. He took it out again, and sniffed it cautiously. The scent was bitter and acrid, like sulfur. Like something that would be flammable, and it was clearly meant to be lit. “I don’t think it is a weapon. I think you light this on fire, and shoot it into the air with this thing, and it makes a burst of light.” On the Crescent Coast archipelagos, he had seen ships signal each other with various contraptions that made light high in the air.

Chime took the device back, turned it over and examined it again. “It could still be a weapon. If you shot it into a kethel’s chest... It would still hurt.”

“Hurt it, but maybe not kill it. I wonder if it would set something on fire.”

“The sac, like Shade suggested?” Chime’s expression was doubtful. “Some things don’t catch on fire easily. It might need to be covered in oil. But there is oil in the hold. It’s made from some kind of sea plant that the Islanders grow. Delin has it for the ship’s lamps and the metal cooking thing.” He added nervously, “And then there’s the part where the sac collapses on the boat and we burn to death.”

“I’m trying to think of a way to avoid that part,” Moon admitted. It would be better to use this as a means of escape, not a way to die spectacularly and take as many Fell with them as possible. But that depended on what the Fell wanted with them.

A thump on the deck above made them both flinch. The wood creaked with the movement of something heavy. Moon shifted, Chime a beat behind him. Moon started for the door, then turned back to shove the weapon at Chime and motion frantically for him to hide it. Moon might regret that, but he thought if the Fell meant to just come in here and eat them all, they would have done it before now.

Chime scooped up the box of projectiles and turned to the cabinets on the far side of the cabin. Moon stepped out into the passage as Lithe and Shade hurried back from the hold area. Floret and Saffron stood at the bottom of the stairs, their spines flared. Floret

whispered, "I think it's a kethel."

The creaking above ceased abruptly, and Moon felt rather than heard the change in the air as the creature shifted. Heavy footsteps crossed the deck toward the stairs.

"Get back," Moon told them. He was thinking that two female warriors more or less wouldn't matter to the Fell and the kethel might just kill both of them if they were within reach. Both hesitated, and he snarled, "Now."

They moved away, reluctantly, as a kethel in groundling form stamped down the stairs.

Its body was big and muscular, more than a head taller than Moon and twice as wide. It wore no clothing except for a silver chain around its neck. Its skin was pale like the rulers, but there the resemblance ended. Its face was bony and the dark eyes were deep-set under a heavy brow. It had long yellow fangs, distended enough to make sores in its lower lip. Its gaze went to Moon and its expression went blank. Its mouth fell open, its throat worked, and a deep voice like gravel and broken glass said, "The crossbreed consort will come with me."

Saffron hissed and Floret twitched. Moon bared his fangs. That was a ruler speaking through the kethel, and probably seeing through its eyes as well. Moon said, "No, he won't."

Moon didn't expect the creature to accept that as an answer. The kethel surged forward, swinging an arm to fling him out of the way. Even in groundling form it was still a kethel, and Moon knew it could crush him if he closed with it. He ducked under its arm and lunged at its throat. Moving faster than he had thought possible, it jerked back and caught him by the shoulder. Moon sunk his claws into its arm and hand, but he could barely penetrate its tough skin.

Then the air changed as Shade shifted behind him. Shade reached over Moon's shoulder, dug claws into the kethel's wrist and twisted. The kethel snarled in pain and released Moon, jerked its hand free and fell back a step.

Moon glanced at Shade to make certain he was ready if the creature charged them. Then he did a double-take.

This was the first time he had seen Shade's shifted form. The shock of it was like a punch to the face.

Shade was big, as big as the kethel's groundling form, and he looked like a Fell ruler. Shade bared his teeth at the kethel, revealing an impressive array of fangs. He said, "Go away."

The kethel made a half-hearted growl, but it was clear from its expression that the ruler no longer had control over it, and that the kethel had never seen anything like Shade. Baffled, it backed away, then climbed the stairs.

They heard the thumps of its feet on the deck, then the boat jerked as it shifted and leapt away.

Chapter Seventeen

Moon stared at Shade. It took an effort of will not to step back and growl. The others stared too, except for Saffron, whose spines flicked in embarrassment and Lithe, who just looked frightened. Shade didn't notice at first, his gaze on the ceiling as he tracked the kethel's movements until it left the boat. He turned to Moon. "Why did it..." His voice trailed off as he realized what the silence in the cabin meant.

He twitched self-consciously and shifted, his dark armored body flowing into his smaller groundling form. He watched Moon warily, like someone who expected the worst.

Moon recognized that expression because he was pretty certain it had been on his face every time he had been forced to shift in front of someone who had thought he was just another groundling. And the worst was always what had happened. He belatedly shifted too, so Shade wouldn't think he was going to attack him. He said, "That's..."

"It's how I've always been." Shade's shoulders hunched in misery. "Did the kethel leave because it thought I was a ruler?"

Moon hadn't had much trouble with Shade's groundling skin color. Maybe because he was used to seeing so many varieties of groundling, and Shade's whole demeanor was so unlike a Fell's, that after the first initial surprise the comparison seemed ridiculous. But this... This he had a problem with. And he needed to get past it, now, before the Fell returned. Because if the kethel had been intimidated by Shade, the other Fell might be too, and that could give them far more of an advantage than a weapon that might or might not be able to start a fire at a distance. "Can you shift again? So I can see?"

Shade met his gaze, startled. Then he shifted.

Moon stayed in groundling form, and made himself look, really look. After a moment, it was clear Shade's form wasn't as much like a ruler's as the first shocked glance had suggested.

He might be as big and muscular as a kethel's groundling body, but his mass was more elegantly proportioned, an Aeriak Raksura's proportions. He had scales, the correct deep black of a consort, but more reflective and without any color undersheen, or color banding

on his claws. The scales seemed to stand out more, giving them a cursory resemblance to a ruler's armor. He did have a ruler's armored crest, but it was smaller, less prominent. He also had a substantial mane of spines and frills sprouting from the base of it, though it was hard to tell, since his spines were self-consciously flat at the moment. Moon was starting to realize what groundlings had felt like when they had caught glimpses of his shifted form and mistaken him for a Fell. "You don't... I don't know what you look like, but it's not a ruler."

That wasn't the most coherent thing he could have said, but Shade seemed to understand. His large array of spines rippled in relief, and he showed Moon the underside of his forearm. "I have ridges on my scales."

Moon leaned in to look, then took Shade's arm and felt his scales. The texture was different, rough rather than smooth. Not unpleasant, just different. Moon stepped back, bumping into Chime who had been edging forward for a closer look. He asked Lithe, "Are you like this?"

She twitched a little nervously, but shifted. Her shape was like an Arbora's, with no extra crest, spines, fangs, or bulk, but her scales were a consort's black, and the same texture as Shade's. She said, "The kethel just wanted Shade, not me. I don't understand that."

"You're a crossbreed mentor," Chime said. He didn't seem as disturbed by Shade's and Lithe's appearance as he had before, and neither did Floret. Maybe they were taking Moon's reaction as a guide, or maybe getting it out in the open and talking about it had been the right thing to do. Chime continued, "Maybe they're afraid of you. They might think you could keep them from shifting, like the mentor-dakti did to us." Lithe frowned, startled and thoughtful. Chime added hopefully, "Could you?"

That she might have this ability had clearly never occurred to Lithe. "I don't think so."

"But you haven't tried?"

"Try," Moon told her.

Above them the deck thumped, a much lighter sound than when the kethel had landed. Everyone's gaze went to the hatch. Moon shifted to his winged form. This will be it. But there were no other thumps, no scratching on the deck as dakti landed. The ruler was approaching alone.

As it came down the steps, Moon recognized it. It was the older ruler who had been on the groundling bladder-boat.

Then the image of Liheas filled Moon's memory, so vivid that bile

rose in his throat. There had been no sign yet that this flight knew anything of the flight that had stalked Indigo Cloud and Sky Copper, but if they knew of that, or had had some connection...

The ruler said, "I am Thedes." Its gaze went to Shade, a long penetrating study, then to Lithe, then back to Shade. "The progenitor would speak with the crossbreed consort."

Shade's spines trembled nervously, and he looked at Moon. The kethel saw Shade shift, and now they know which one of us they want, Moon thought. Shade said, "No."

"You will not be harmed. Or touched." There was no emotion in the words. Thedes might not have known what they meant. It didn't inspire confidence in the truth of the statement.

Moon said, "Did you say that to the groundlings at Aventera?"

Thedes focused on Moon. There was a brief flicker of what might have been indulgent amusement in the dark eyes. Moon didn't believe it. Thedes was old enough to know how to mimic emotions his prey might find reassuring. Thedes said, "They were groundlings. We don't pretend they are people."

"You don't pretend we're people, either."

Thedes's empty gaze returned to Shade. "We treat you as we treat each other."

Moon swallowed a frustrated hiss. Trying to argue with that statement would be like fighting your way out of a branch spider's web, mostly because it was probably true. The Fell didn't treat each other gently, either.

The ruler waited for Moon to reply, then said to Shade, "We have let you keep your wounded, and the warriors and the mentor." This was said as if it was a completely meaningless indulgence. "We have been generous and kind. You deserve our kindness." He inclined his head toward Moon. "The older consort may accompany you."

Moon didn't let his spines flatten. He had been expecting a threat, and it wasn't as if the Fell couldn't drag them all out of the boat if they wanted. Shade glanced at Moon for help, and Moon flicked a spine in assent.

Shade said to the ruler. "I'll go." Then he steeled himself with obvious effort. "Moon doesn't have to come with me."

Moon knew he could tell himself he had to stay behind to help defend the wounded since Thedes's word to spare them was worth less than nothing. But the idea of letting Shade walk out of here alone to

face whatever he had to face made a painful knot in his chest. Shade might look like a predator, but he had been gently raised and protected and indulged, and he had little idea of what might happen. And Moon had been abandoned so many times, he just didn't want Shade to know what that felt like. "I'll go," Moon said.

Shade tried not to react but a betraying ripple of relief fluttered through his spines.

Thedes turned away and started up the stairs. Moon stepped close to Floret and Chime and mouthed the words, "If we don't come back, use the weapon." Chime looked horrified but Floret nodded a determined assent. Then Moon and Shade followed Thedes.

As they reached the deck, Shade asked Thedes, "How did you know about me and the others? The crossbreeds? How did you know about what happened to Opal Night?"

"Our guide told us. When you see it, you will understand," Thedes said, then sprang off the deck.

Shade threw a nervous glance at Moon. Moon tried to look reassuring, but thought the most he managed was grim resignation. They followed Thedes.

The ruler headed toward the large mass Moon had seen earlier, making his way over to it by springing to and from the web-like supports that stretched across the dim space. As Moon leapt after him, the sticky texture of the supports reminded him of the parasites' webs inside the leviathan's body; it made the skin creep under his scales.

They dropped down onto the top of the structure, and Moon realized it must be a nest. The surface was unpleasantly crunchy underfoot, and made of debris stuck together with the same secretions as the supports. The horrific smell was even worse, Fell stench combined with death and rotting plants. Following Thedes across the uneven surface, Moon saw deadfall wood of various trees, some with withered leaves still attached, hewn planks that might have come from dwellings or ships, bits of carved wood, broken metal fragments, torn cloth. And bones, he realized, as he stepped over something that looked very like a groundling's ribcage.

There were more remains around the entrance, a round doorway in the top that led down into the structure. The bones weren't ornamental, Moon decided as he climbed down the half-stair half-ladder of secretion-covered debris. The placement of long bones, skulls and jaw fragments was entirely random. He had seen kethel wear scalps or bones as decorations, but these looked like they were no more prized than the scrap wood.

Light came from various sources, all of which must have been looted from groundlings: a chased metal container with a glowing ball inside, that flickered madly as whatever powered it failed, glowing plant material packed into wicker boxes, some glowing mineral blocks like the ones Moon had seen in the turning city in the eastern mountains. Thedes led them through a maze of small chambers and dim passages, spiraling down through the multiple levels of the nest. The deeper they went, the more Moon sensed movement all around them, hidden in the dark, bodies drawing breath and pumping blood, waiting and watching. But the only clear sound was his own heart pounding and the hitch of fear in Shade's breath.

Then the passage turned into a steep slope down into a larger chamber. One side was supported with the wooden frame and partial wall of a groundling ship, either a water-going vessel or a flying one, it was hard to tell. The dark wooden planking on the wall still showed signs of faded paint, and had a round window with silver studs. The other half of the room was supported by giant arches of bone, the ribcage of some large creature as big as a... kethel, Moon thought, suddenly realizing what he was looking at. Part of the chamber was made out of the body cavity of a dead kethel.

Thedes led them further in, to where the floor became a series of broad uneven steps, curving down toward the far end. Fell lounged in the shadows everywhere. Moon was braced to see crossbreeds, but the dakti he could spot looked like ordinary Fell. Some were in their groundling forms, naked, their bodies small and thin with light skin, matted dark hair, and rough features. They stared at Moon and Shade with dark eyes and identical expressions of hungry interest.

Then the room curved around and Moon saw the progenitor.

She sat on a pile of rich fabrics and clothing looted from groundling prey. Even curled into a sitting position, he could tell she was much larger than the one other progenitor he had had the misfortune to see. Her scales were black, her leathery wings wrapped around her body, and she looked like a ruler with a smaller head crest and a softer texture to her armored scales. But he thought she would be at least a head taller than Thedes. He wasn't sure what that meant, if she was older, more powerful.

Several younger rulers gathered in front of her, with more scattered clothing for cushions. Their white skin seemed to shine in the dimness of the room, their dark hair like falls of silk, framing the cold, perfect beauty of their features.

A quiver of movement drew Moon's gaze to the shapes that lay piled on the floor behind the rulers. As he realized what they were,

the sharp shock cleared his thoughts. He made himself focus on the fine clothes the rulers wore, some in tatters, relics from their previous feeding, some new brocades that came from their prey at Aventera. Made himself remember that the beauty was a lie and a trap, a mask to hide blind predatory hunger.

He slid a sideways glance at Shade, wondering if Shade's blood made him immune or easier prey to the Fell influence. He nudged Shade's arm, and tilted his head toward the pile.

Shade twitched, stared, and made a choked-off noise of distress.

The shapes tumbled there were slender bodies with pale gray skin: dead male and female Aventerans, some naked and some still partially clothed. The Fell were about to eat.

Thedes melted into his groundling form. He smiled, and it was as if he drew all the light and air toward him. Moving with weightless grace, he moved to a spot near the other rulers and sat down. He gestured. "Sit with us."

Shade's spines shivered, and he looked at Moon in mute appeal. Moon gripped his wrist, squeezing briefly to reassure Shade and steady himself. Moon stepped into the empty spot next to Thedes and sat down on the mat of discarded clothing. The fabrics were heavy and rich, the scent rising up held must, dried blood, piss, and old fear sweat. Shade sank down next to him, trembling.

Thedes smiled his approval. Moon felt it pull at some small part of his heart, and hated himself for it. Thedes said, "This is how friends behave."

Shade hissed in angry disbelief. The rulers all tilted their heads, almost in unison. One said, "Why do we wait? That one was there when Ivades was killed; I see it in him."

Thedes said, "That was the past. We are friends now." He waited, as if giving the others the chance to voice any objections. Then he said, "Now we eat. Like friends."

A few dakti eased forward to the pile of groundling bodies and shifted to their winged forms. The first one leaned in, ripped an arm off an Aventeran woman, and carried it to the progenitor.

The progenitor accepted the offering and bit into it, ripping off a chunk and chewing with delicate precision. The other dakti tore into the corpses, pulled off the arms and legs and carried them to the rulers. Moon was careful not to let his eyes focus on the bodies. He didn't want to see an Aventeran face he recognized. Or any sign that some of them weren't quite dead yet. The rulers started to eat, their

fangs digging into the gray flesh.

Then a dakti stepped between Thedes and Moon, its leathery wings brushing Moon's shoulder. It dropped a groundling leg in front of Shade, the bruised gray flesh stained with congealed blood. Shade flinched. Moon ignored it.

Thedes said, "We asked you to eat with us."

Moon should have seen this coming, should have sensed the sick inevitability of it. He said, "No."

Thedes fixed his gaze on Shade. "He speaks for you."

"He does," Shade said. His voice came out in a growl.

"If he was not here, you would eat?"

Shade showed his fangs, and it caused a moment of stillness among the rulers and dakti. "I won't eat."

"You prefer different food," Thedes said. He inclined his head toward Moon. "We can provide."

Moon sensed movement behind him and flared his spines just as a weight struck his head. He pitched forward and rolled, realized it was a dakti as it tumbled off him. He shoved upright but more dakti hit him, bounced him off the far wall and slammed him into the floor. Moon clawed, bit and twisted but they piled on top of him and there were too many. He felt claws dig into his scales but not rips or slashes, and knew they were trying to smother him unconscious. The panic of that thought almost made him lose the remaining air in his lungs, then the weight lessened abruptly.

He rolled to a crouch, breathing hard, braced to move. Dakti scattered and Shade stood only a few paces away, spines flared, facing Thedes and the other rulers. Shade snarled, "Leave him alone, and I'll do it."

"No, don't—" Moon said in reflex, but Thedes said, "Quiet. Stay there. Speak again and we will bring the warriors here and eat them."

Moon knew that wasn't an idle threat. He subsided unwillingly, his spines flicking in helpless agitation. As if nothing had happened, Thedes said to Shade, "Sit. Eat. We will be friends."

Shade's spines flattened in despair and he stepped back to the spot where the torn leg lay. He sat down, and Moon saw his muscles tense as he braced himself. He picked up the leg, tore out a bite, chewed and swallowed it. He dropped the leg as if it had stung his hand, but Thedes seemed satisfied.

The progenitor and the rulers began to eat again. Moon felt every nerve under his scales twitch with the urge to flee, but he stayed where he was. Shade didn't look at him.

When the progenitor and the rulers were finished, the dakti slunk forward again and dragged the heads, torsos, and other remains to the back of the room, where they tore them apart, stuffing the flesh into their mouths.

Then the progenitor uncoiled, pulled her wings back and drifted to her feet. Shade stood, his spines trembling. Moon's throat was dry. They were about to find out what the Fell wanted with them. To find out I made a mistake by not setting us all on fire, he thought.

As the progenitor paced towards Shade, something stirred in the nest behind her, then heaved itself into a sitting position. It was about the size of a dakti, but there was something different, unformed, about its leathery wings and its headcrest. As its head lifted up and bright black eyes opened, Moon realized it must be a fledgling progenitor. It crept forward a pace, snagged a groundling arm left beside the nest, and bit into it with relish.

The progenitor stopped a pace away from Shade, then slowly circled him, step by step. She cocked her head, examining him with deliberation. Shade twitched, but managed to keep his spines still through sheer effort of will. She stopped in front of him, and said, "Show me your other self."

Her voice was deep and grating, with a strange quality to it, as if it came from a much larger body. Shade flicked a sideways look at Moon. "No."

The progenitor studied Moon, then turned back to Shade. "The Raksura will never let you breed. I would give you anything you wanted."

Shade bared his fangs and his array of spines rippled and lifted. "I don't want to breed, ever. And I have everything I want, except to see you dead."

Something in the progenitor's body language changed, and Moon realized that she had spoken hoping to provoke this reaction from Shade.

She said, "Thedes told you you would understand the significance of what our guide has revealed to us."

She heard what Thedes said to us, Moon thought. Maybe she had even seen them and the others on the boat through his eyes.

She didn't gesture, but one of the dakti slunk forward, holding a

flat wooden case. Shade's tail lashed uneasily. Moon had no idea what this could be, except that it was probably something horrible.

The dakti opened the case and held it out. Moon warily stretched to see. Inside was a flat fragment of crystal, jagged on the edges as if it had been broken off a larger piece. The flicker of light sparked blue and silver reflections inside it. If it was a weapon, it was a strange one.

"Touch it," the progenitor said.

Moon drew breath to tell Shade not to do it, but Shade snapped, "You touch it."

The progenitor stared at him, and Moon felt a chill across his scales as the temperature in the room dropped. Then Thedes stepped up beside the dakti and touched a finger to the crystal.

Gray lines formed on it, gradually resolved into a drawing. The image had been etched onto the crystal and Thedes's light touch had brought it to the surface. Moon didn't think the Fell could have created something like that, either with magic or without, and he wondered what groundling race they had stolen it from. As the drawing became more defined, he could see it was an Aeriak Raksura, but with something odd about its head and back... It has too many spines and a crest. Like Shade.

Shade hissed in a breath, confused. "Who is that?"

The progenitor said, "A forerunner. Our mutual origin."

Shade stared at the image. "You're saying that this is one of the species that the Aeriak Raksura and the Fell descended from."

"We had a prey make it for us, to our description. Prey are sometimes useful for things other than eating."

"Is this what you were trying to do?" Shade spoke in a tone of cold realization. "By making crossbreeds?"

Moon stared at him, startled. That couldn't be right. They want more power, they want Fell queens and mentor-dakti that can stop us from shifting, that can snoop to spy on us and augur. He looked at the image again. But the progenitor hadn't shown any interest in Lithe, and if they wanted power, a half-Fell mentor had to be better than a half-Fell consort, no matter what he looked like. Unless the Fell thought Shade had some special ability.

Shade said, "But why? Why do you want this?"

The progenitor answered, "Because this is the key our guide needs."

“The key to what?” Shade glared at her in frustration. “And who is your guide?”

“You will see when we arrive.”

Shade snarled. “How did it know I was at Opal Night?”

“It knows. It has watched for a—” The progenitor abruptly went still. Then all the Fell in the room went still. Except for the fledgling progenitor, who looked around curiously. Shade twitched with nerves. Moon’s back teeth itched. It was as if the progenitor held them all in some sort of mutual spell. If it’s the progenitor. Maybe they were listening to something, or someone, else.

Suddenly whatever it was released them. The progenitor’s body became fluid again. A ripple seemed to travel over the rulers, and the dakti stirred, whispering to each other. Even Thedes flexed his claws.

As if nothing had happened, the progenitor said to Shade, “Surely you wish to know more of us. To take your proper place among those who find you beautiful.”

“I was in my proper place before you stole us,” Shade said bitterly.

The progenitor just regarded him in silence. Moon couldn’t tell if she was frustrated or angry or indifferent. Fell only seemed to show emotion under extreme circumstances. But he wondered how long it had been since any living being had told her no.

Then she turned away and paced back toward her nest.

Thedes said, “Return to your flying craft. We have a distance still to travel.”

Shade looked at Moon, startled. Then he turned for the way out. Moon pushed to his feet to follow. His spines twitched involuntarily, but no one tried to stop him.

The interior was confusing without a guide, but they managed to make their way up through the dark maze to the entrance. Dakti clung to the walls and ceilings, watching them with glittering eyes, chittering to each other. A kethel in groundling form stood near the ladder, grinning at them. Shade hissed at it and it backed away enough that they could scramble up and out.

There was movement everywhere as they fled back to the boat, as if all the Fell inside the sac were aware of them. The shadows seemed full of motion, and Moon looked up, trying to see where it came from. The sun had changed angles, and the dark outline of one of the kethel outside was visible through the gelatinous material of the sac, its

wings moving rhythmically.

They landed on the deck of the boat, and an instant later Floret and Saffron burst up out of the belowdecks hatch. Moon hissed in relief and made a sharp gesture for them to get below again. At least the Fell hadn't attacked the others on the boat.

As the warriors retreated, Shade said in a choked voice, "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry." Moon tried to think of a way to say thank you and everything seemed inadequate. He felt like he had failed Shade badly, that he should have prevented it from happening, thought of something to say to stop it. "We got out alive because of you."

Shade's spines flattened in distress. "Did they really think... doing that would make me one of them—" Then he started and hissed, "Kethel!"

Moon sensed movement behind him an instant later but he was already diving for the hatch with Shade. They scrambled down the steps, with Floret and Saffron just ahead, as the kethel landed on the deck and the ship rocked and creaked under its weight. At the bottom of the stairs, Moon stopped, braced for an attack.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the kethel moved around and settled on the deck, making the ship list a little to one side. Moon listened, but all he could hear was deep breathing.

"Guarding us?" Floret whispered.

Moon nodded, and eased away from the stairs. Shade reached up and slid the hatch closed. The light wood wouldn't even slow the kethel down, but Moon didn't tell him not to bother. That useless barrier between them and the creature was better than nothing.

Floret looked from Moon to Shade and asked, "You're all right? They didn't—"

"We're fine." Moon cut the question off quickly.

Shade shook his ruffled spines out. "Something happened in there. I mean, something other than—When the progenitor started to say how the guide knew about Opal Night, and they all went still, it was like something else came into the room. But I couldn't see it. Did you notice that?"

"I saw them all listening to something we couldn't hear." If the Fell's mysterious guide was something that could hide itself from sight, then they were even worse off than they had been before, if that was possible.

Saffron said, “Your warrior is claiming to hear things.”

Floret said in exasperation, “I told you, he used to be a mentor. He’s different.” She explained to Moon, “Chime heard something, like he did in the leviathan city.”

They stepped into the main cabin, and Moon found Lithe and Chime sitting on the floor. She stared into Chime’s eyes, and there was an odd stillness in his body. She must be looking into his mind to check for Fell influence.

Then Lithe leaned back and Chime blinked, a little disoriented as she released him. It was a sensation Moon was familiar with from when Flower had done this to him. She said, “I don’t see anything in there.”

Moon almost snorted with laughter, then realized he was a little hysterical. He sat down on the floor and shifted to groundling so he could bury his face in his hands for a moment.

When he looked up, everyone was staring worriedly at him. Chime sat in front of him, and Shade had shifted to groundling and crouched protectively at his side. Chime leaned in for a close look at Moon’s face. He asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Moon shook his head. “No. Lithe, you need to look into both of us too.”

“But they didn’t—” Shade stopped, frustrated. “If they did, we wouldn’t remember it, would we?”

They both sat while Lithe checked them for Fell influence. Lithe did Shade first, and after a long moment pronounced him free of any interference. Shade sighed in relief, and Moon felt the sick tightness in his chest ease. If the Fell hadn’t done it to Shade, then they hadn’t done it to Moon either. But he still wanted Lithe to check him, to make certain the others knew he wasn’t compromised.

Moon had the same trouble relaxing and letting Lithe in as he had with Flower. Once he managed it, it was over in what felt like an eye blink. Lithe gave him a quick smile, and said, “You’re fine, too.”

“Good.” Moon gave Shade a nudge with his elbow. “Tell them what the progenitor said, and that image they showed us. And about the thing you felt come into the room.”

He hoped he was getting across that Shade should leave out the part about what the Fell had made him do. With a guilty glance at Moon, Shade skipped over the feeding and told the others only about the guide the Fell had spoken of, the image the progenitor had shown them, and what he thought it meant.

When Shade reached the part about the presence he had sensed, Chime nodded grimly. He said, "I heard something while you were gone, a voice. I couldn't understand what it said. I think it was speaking Raksuran, but I just couldn't make out the words." He nodded to Lithe. "That's why I asked Lithe to look into my mind. I wanted to make sure it wasn't the Fell, trying to make me do something, somehow."

"That's not how it works, is it?" Saffron said. "They can't take over your mind from a distance."

"No, I know that." Chime bared his teeth at her. "But—"

"But you're different," Moon supplied.

"Yes." Chime twitched uneasily. "But she didn't find anything."

"I don't understand how Chime used to be a mentor," Shade said to Moon.

"Chime was born a mentor, at the old Indigo Cloud colony, but because the court was getting weaker, he changed into a warrior," Moon told him.

"It wasn't on purpose," Chime muttered, as Shade stared at him in surprise.

Moon continued, "He couldn't do magic anymore or scry. But when we were looking for the seed from our mountain-tree, he heard a leviathan, out on the freshwater sea to the west of the Reaches. He could tell things about it that helped us."

Shade considered that, biting his lower lip. He said to Chime, "So you can only sense things that are big, and very powerful?"

Chime slumped in resignation. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Moon rubbed his temple. His head ached, pain that seemed centered to either side of his nose, probably from the bad air and terrible scents. He still had dried blood on his chest and arms, and the Fell stench clung to his skin. But everyone else was in the same shape, and he didn't want to waste water cleaning up. He asked Lithe, "Did you try to see if you could keep us from shifting?"

Lithe said, "I tried on Chime, but it didn't work." She lifted her hands in frustration. "Even if I could keep Raksura from shifting, I doubt I could do it to Fell. Queens being able to control our shifting is a Raksuran trait, not a Fell one."

Everyone looked glum and discouraged and not particularly surprised. Moon had to admit that if Lithe had special powers from her crossbreed heritage, she probably would have noticed before now.

He asked, "If progenitors can't keep rulers from shifting, how do they control them?"

"That's a good question," Chime said. "I don't think anyone knows the answer. Except maybe that dead scholar of predators that Delin knew."

Moon just hoped Delin was still alive. If Celadon and the others had escaped Aventura and reached the flying island where Jade, Stone, and Malachite waited... He pushed the thought away. They couldn't count on rescue.

Shade sat forward. "I think it's the connection between them. Like our queens have with the court." He turned to Moon. "The progenitor knew what Thedes had said to us."

Moon had noticed that, too. "I've always thought the rulers were the ones who control the flight. I knew the crossbreed queen, Ranea, could make the rulers do things, even across long distances, but I thought that was just because she was a crossbreed."

Chime's expression suggested this wasn't a pleasant thought. "Maybe it wasn't just her ability; maybe it's something all progenitors can do."

Saffron had been listening to the conversation with her expression set in an impatient grimace. But she said, "Can the progenitor do it to us? Or try to do it? Maybe it was her voice that Chime heard."

At least she sounded as if she was actually trying to help them figure things out. Moon asked Chime, "Was it?"

Chime lifted his hands in bafflement. "I don't know."

Lithe reached over and squeezed his wrist. "Just try to listen. You never know what might happen. I'm going to scry and see if I can tell where we're going."



Lithe retreated to another cabin for privacy, and Moon helped Chime and Shade check and care for the wounded. He had been in a healing sleep himself, but had never had to take care of someone in one. It was useful knowledge and he was glad to learn it; he just hoped he survived long enough for it to come in handy again.

After that, Moon spent the time making and discarding bad plans. There was just no way they could escape with the wounded, either on the boat or not, especially now that a major kethel seemed settled on the deck to stay. They might be able to set the sac or the progenitor's nest on fire, but that wasn't going to stop the kethel outside the sac

from attacking them.

It was Shade the Fell really wanted. If they could get out of the sac and Moon could persuade Shade to run with the warriors and Lithe, while he stayed behind to distract the Fell... It wasn't Moon's favorite idea, considering what the Fell would do to him and the wounded before killing them. There was also the strong possibility that the warriors might not be able to fly fast enough to evade pursuit.

Moon's sense of the sun's passage told him it was setting now, somewhere outside the sac. They were still moving at what felt like the same speed, still toward the north. Moon hated feeling useless, so he went to the foodstores and took out some flatbread, fruit, and strips of dried cooked meat and fish. He divided it up, setting aside a share for Lithe, and made the others eat whether they liked it or not. They didn't like it, but everyone seemed less edgy afterward.

Shade regarded his portion with a sickly expression. He said, "I don't know if I can. Ever again."

Moon took the dried meat and put it back in the basket. "Just the fruit and bread."

Shade managed to choke it down with difficulty. Watching sympathetically, Chime said, "It's the Fell stench. It's making me sick too."

Moon didn't comment.

Saffron and Floret and Chime managed to settle who would take turns standing watch in the passage and who would sleep and when. Then Chime told Moon that Moon needed to sleep, that he was starting to say things that didn't make sense. Rather than have the fight that had just been averted by the food, Moon stomped over to the far end of the cabin, flung himself down on a blanket and pretended to sleep.

After a short time, Shade came over with another blanket and settled down a few paces away, with a studied casualness that didn't fool Moon for a moment. Moon patted the blanket next to him.

Shade didn't hesitate, scooting over to curl up next to Moon. Moon put an arm around him and pulled him close. But he didn't sleep for a long time, listening to Shade weep quietly against his chest.



Moon woke when he heard Lithe and Chime talking quietly. Shade was still curled up against his chest, breathing deeply. Moon eased away from him. When he stirred, Moon whispered, "Go back to sleep," and Shade subsided.

He got to his feet and stepped quietly across the cabin. Floret had shifted to groundling, and slept sitting up against the wall near the doorway. Moon stopped to check the passage and saw Saffron perched midway up the steps, her attention on the deck above and the rhythmic breathing of their kethel guard.

Chime and Lithe sat near the wounded, with a piece of Delin's pounded reed paper and one of his drawing sticks between them. Chime glanced up at Moon and said quietly, "Lithe saw something."

Moon knew he meant the scrying. He sat down beside them, looking at the paper. Sketched on it was a flower, like a lily or a sea-flower, with a door in the center. Lithe said, "I saw trees clinging to cliffs, smelled saltwater and rock, heard waves crash. It makes sense; we're still heading north, and there's a salt sea several hundred ells to the north of the Aventerans' plateau—or at least that's what the court's old histories say. There's been no reason to go in this direction for turns."

"What's an ell?" Moon asked, still too half-asleep to care about exposing his lack of knowledge.

"It's an Arbora walking measurement," Chime said. "That would be... What, about fourteen days of warrior's flight?"

"Something like that," Lithe said. She rubbed her temple as if trying to coax more information out of it. "It's been so long since I looked at the court's maps. I suspect kethel fly much faster."

"About three or four times as fast as a warrior. And they haven't stopped to rest," Moon said. They must be switching out, the shifted kethel carrying kethel in groundling form to take their places.

"So this door is somewhere on the coast." Chime tugged the paper around so he could study it. "It all must mean something. That image they showed you, crossbreeds, a salt sea..."

Moon stared at the sketch of the flower with the door inside it, feeling his brain shake off the sleep and slowly grind into motion. "They said Shade was the key. Maybe they meant that literally."

Chime frowned at the paper, and Lithe said slowly, "The key to this door. Only someone who is part Fell and part Raksura can open it?"

"Or someone who looked like the image they showed us." Moon wished he had had a longer look at it. "A forerunner, one of our ancestors."

"All right, so say that's true," Chime said. "What's behind the door? If Shade is right, the Fell have been capturing consorts and

Arbora and forcing them to breed for the past forty turns. What would they want so badly..." He trailed off.

Lithe hugged herself. "And it wasn't just the flight that attacked our colony in the east, it was the one that attacked Indigo Cloud, too. They both failed and were destroyed, and this flight took up the task?"

Moon felt cold creep down his spine and settle in his stomach. Malachite had ruined the plan forty turns ago by finding the flight that had attacked Opal Night, killing the progenitor and all the rulers, and taking the crossbreeds. But the flight that had attacked Indigo Cloud must have begun their breeding experiment sometime before that. Destroying some small eastern court, taking the consorts and the Arbora and breeding them until they died, attacking Sky Copper and then Indigo Cloud to capture more Raksura. The Fell queen Ranea had implied that it was all meant to make the Fell more powerful. Maybe she was a mistake. They never wanted a queen, they wanted a consort like Shade. And then Ranea came along, took over the flight and ruined the plan.

But who—or what—had come up with the plan? Who had gotten three—at least three, if there had been more failures in the east—different Fell flights to follow this scheme, and how had it known that the crossbreeds were still alive in Opal Night's mother colony? That one of them was Shade, the crossbreed consort they had been hoping for, all this time.

Chime grimaced in distress. "I don't want Shade to be right."

"I don't want a lot of things." Moon picked up the drawing. "If the voice you heard, that thing Shade thought came into the nest, is their guide, why are they listening to it?"

"What did it offer them?" Lithe added quietly.

There was no answer for that, either.

Chapter Eighteen

The night wore on, and nothing changed. The kethel didn't move from the deck, and the sac didn't stop its rapid progress north. None of them slept well and the air seemed to get even worse; thick with Fell stench, stale, and damp, it was making everyone ill. Keeping their voices carefully low so the kethel wouldn't hear, they talked about using the fire weapon and the oil to escape, and made and discarded a number of plans.

It all came down to the simple fact that even if they could get out of the sac, there was no way any of them could outrun the kethel, whether they tried to carry Lithe and the wounded or not. Moon thought the only way it might work was if some of them stayed behind to try to distract the Fell, while one or two tried to escape. And this would mean abandoning the wounded to die terribly.

As they sat on the floor of the cabin wearing their groundlings forms, weary, sick, and filthy, it was Saffron who finally brought up the inevitable. She said, simply, "I won't leave Ivory."

"No," Floret agreed with a sigh. "I won't leave Song and Root. I'm not keen on leaving anyone."

Moon looked around. No one seemed hopeful. He said, "Is anyone willing to run, if we can get you out?" To make it sound less like an admission of weakness, he added, "To tell Opal Night what happened."

They exchanged a few glances, but no one volunteered. Shade drew his fingers across the wooden deck. He had been quiet through the morning, and Moon had been keeping a worried eye on him. Shade said, "I can't leave Lithe, or Ivory, or the warriors. Or you." He lifted his head to meet Moon's gaze. "I can't."

Moon rubbed his face. He hadn't really expected anything else, but they had all just agreed to die here, and it felt wrong. It felt like failure and surrender. But he didn't see another way. "All right. That's settled." He let his breath out in resignation. "We can't let the Fell get to this place, whatever it is."

Floret lifted her head. "The fire weapon."

Miserable, Chime leaned against Moon's shoulder and said, "I

really don't want to burn or get eaten, so will you promise to kill me before that happens?"

That was just another weight on Moon's sinking heart, but he put an arm around Chime and hugged. "Yes."

Lithe huddled in on herself. "Me too, please."

Moon could tell he was going to end up killing everybody except Saffron, who was the only one he wouldn't have minded killing. "Let's figure out what we're going to do, first."

Saffron shrugged. "With the kethel guarding the deck, we can't get out there with the fire weapon." She added reluctantly, "So... we use it in here?"

No one seemed happy about that idea. Moon didn't think it would accomplish anything except suicide. He said, "We need to set the sac on fire. If we set the boat on fire, even with the oil, I'm not sure it'll do that."

Chime sat up. "The boat will come apart, and the section that's not attached to the sustainer will fall on the sac. But the Fell could just cut a hole in it and push the boat out."

Shade set his jaw, grimly determined. "We just have to get the oil and the fire weapon outside the boat. Maybe I could say I wanted to talk to the progenitor, and get out on deck with it."

"But you wouldn't have time to do anything," Floret pointed out. "You'd be carrying casks of oil and a groundling weapon. That kethel would flatten you as soon as it saw you."

"We don't have to go out on deck," Lithe said suddenly. "We can cut a hole in the bottom of the boat."

Now that was an idea. Moon said, "We could drop the oil onto the bottom of the sac, then shoot the fire weapon into it."

Forgetting about their impending deaths, Chime looked excited by the prospect. "There are cutting tools onboard."

Saffron said, "But what if the Fell realize what we're doing? If the kethel feels the vibrations through the wood—"

Chime shook his head. "This wood doesn't vibrate much at all. I noticed that when we first came aboard and slept on the floor. Even with all the groundlings walking around."

Shade added, "None of you felt it up on the deck when I was climbing around under the boat."

Lithe said, "And I doubt it would ever occur to the Fell to think

that we'd do something to kill ourselves. They're not exactly good at seeing from anyone else's perspective."

Floret agreed. "They'd think we were trying to escape. That might work to our advantage."

She meant the Fell might prepare for Raksura escaping out of the hole in the boat, but not for oil and fire. If they could set a kethel on fire, it would be even better. Moon said, "Let's get started."



The first obstacle they encountered was the hull of the flying boat.

They had found some cutting tools during their first search of the cabins, and Moon thought that the small saw would be all they needed to cut through wood that seemed so light and fragile.

While Floret and Saffron kept watch, and Lithe tended to the wounded, Moon, Chime, and Shade went to the stern hold, where the bottom hull of the ship flattened out. They brought a couple of the lamps to light the area, and the soft glow of the spelled illumination was more than enough in the low-ceilinged space. They moved bales of supplies aside, Chime used ink from Delin's store to mark out a square large enough to dump an oil cask through, and they got to work.

But the rounded blade of the saw, sharp as it was, could barely be forced through the wood.

After Moon and Shade working together managed to cut only a few fragments out, Moon said in exasperation, "I thought Niran was afraid the Arbora's anvils would break the hull of the Valendera. This stuff is like iron."

Chime grimaced. "Blossom was in charge of the repairs to Niran's boats, and she said it turned out to be a bigger job than she thought at first. Now I know what she meant." He used his claws to pick apart a chip. "I think an anvil is the only thing that would go through this. It's not like wood from an ordinary tree. It's all woven through with some sort of fiber. I wonder if they get it from the sea bottom."

Moon leaned over to look. Chime was right: the outside appeared to be wood, but the inside was more like a thick leaf, shot through with a fibrous web that must make it extremely strong. Shade picked up another chip to examine it, and Moon said, "It makes sense. These boats travel so far, they'd have to be tough."

They looked at each other in dismay. Chime admitted, "We can still cut it; it's just going to take longer than we thought."

Shade set the chip down. “But we were all worked up to kill ourselves today.”

They stared at him. He winced. “I was trying to make a joke. It didn’t work?”

Chime snorted, half in amusement and half in despair. Moon gave Shade a push on the shoulder. “Help me look for something to sharpen the saw.”

They took turns, working in teams of two, all the rest of the long day. Lithe tried using her magic to heat the section they wanted to cut through. It seemed to help a little, but Moon honestly couldn’t tell whether it was their imagination or not. They had to sharpen the saw frequently, and Moon began to worry that it would break. There were others onboard, but none as well-suited to the task as this one, and if they had to use another it would take even longer.

They weren’t cutting the wood completely through, leaving the outermost membrane intact to keep the cut piece from sagging and revealing their activity to any Fell that might be climbing or flying below them. It would make pushing the piece out a slower process than Moon would like, but this way was safer.

By that night everyone was exhausted and could barely force themselves to eat. Moon’s head was pounding and his stomach revolted even at the idea of bread and water. He would have thought it was a lingering effect of Russet’s poison, except that all the others clearly felt the same way. The only ones who were breathing well were the wounded; the healing sleep seemed to protect them from whatever it was.

“It’s the air,” Lithe said, wearily wiping her face. “It’s turning into a poison. The sac has to let in some fresh air, or we’d all be dead by now. But there must be too many Fell inside it.”

“Will it help if we block off the holes in the boat?” Saffron asked. There were small perforations at points in the sides of the hull, to vent the cabins.

“I think that might just kill us faster,” Lithe admitted.

They kept working through the night.



Moon woke suddenly, finding himself slumped over on the deck in the main cabin. His head felt clear for the first time in two days, and the pain in his temples had faded to a dull ache. Shade and Lithe sprawled nearby, stirring in their sleep. Saffron, leaning against the wall near the door and technically on guard, sat up blinking as if she

had just woken. It felt like late morning.

Moon tasted the air; it was distinctly fresher, even under the Fell taint. “They must have opened the sac,” he said aloud.

Saffron stumbled to her feet. “We’re still moving.”

Maybe enough dakti had died off that the rulers had decided to let in some fresh air. Maybe we’re almost there, and they opened it to send out scouts. There was no salt scent in the air; it was impossible to tell how close or how far away the sea was.

Moon managed to stand, one leg tingling as circulation returned, and limped down the passage to the stern hold. Shade and Lithe trailed after him. The deck creaked overhead as the kethel stirred restlessly.

In the hold, Chime and Floret were just sitting up. They had both shifted to groundling, and were bleary and confused. “We fell asleep.” Chime yawned. “Is the air better?”

“The Fell opened the sac.” Moon crouched beside the cut section and felt it to see how much was left to go. Two sides of the square were finished, and the third had about a pace left. He leaned on it with both hands and applied his full groundling weight; it gave a little, but didn’t seem like it was ready to tear or break. But they wouldn’t need to do the whole section, just enough to push the flap down. They could always pour the oil out if they had to, but he thought knocking holes in the casks and dropping them would spread it faster, and prevent the Fell from stopping the fire before it was too late.

Then Saffron ducked into the hold, her spines flared. “More Fell just landed on the deck. A ruler spoke through the hatch, said they want to see Shade.”

Moon hissed a curse. They had just run out of time. They all stared at Shade. He stared back, startled. Then his spines shivered, and he said, reluctantly, “We can’t take the chance that they’ll come down here and see this. I have to go up on deck.”

“I’ll go with you,” Moon said. Chime stirred as if he might protest, but said nothing.

Shade took a deep breath. “You don’t have to.”

Yes, Moon did. He said, “They’ll expect it, because I did before.”

They left the others waiting anxiously, and started down the passage.

At the base of the steps, Shade stopped, his spines flicking in

agitation. He squeezed his eyes shut, steeling himself. “Do you think they’re going to make me... do that again?”

After last time, the Fell knew Shade would do anything to protect the other Raksura, and there was no reason for them not to use that advantage. And there was no point in lying about it. “Probably.”

Shade made a noise somewhere between a hiss and a moan of despair. “At least the groundlings are dead. It doesn’t hurt them.”

Fell liked their prey to be freshly killed. There might have been captive Aventerans alive somewhere in the nest, kept for the next meal. Moon wasn’t going to tell Shade that.

They went up on deck, and Moon pushed the hatch closed behind them. It was hard to tell if there was still an opening in the sac somewhere or not. The light through the membrane was dim and murky, but while the air wasn’t fresh, it wasn’t painful to breathe, either.

As they stepped cautiously out from behind the steering cabin, Moon saw their kethel guard half-curved around the mast. Its legs and arms hung over the rails, and the big ugly horned head rested on the deck. Its eyes were slits, watching them with interest. Thedes stood near it, and dakti perched on the railings like particularly ugly carrion birds.

Thedes smiled at Shade. “We would speak with you again.”

Shade twitched nervously. Maybe he had been hoping, up to this moment, that the ruler wanted something else. “And you’ll kill the others if I don’t come, I know.”

“You make us sound cruel,” Thedes said, with complete conviction.

“Cruel?” Shade hissed. “Why do you have to make it sound like everything you do to us is our fault?”

Thedes didn’t answer that one. He said, “This time, the other consort will stay behind.”

Moon felt a rush of relief, then a rush of guilt for it. The Fell knew he had an influence on Shade, and they didn’t want him present for whatever persuasion they were planning. “Shade...” He couldn’t say “Don’t do what they want,” when refusing to cooperate with the Fell might get one or more of the others killed. What he wanted to say was “Remember you’re a Raksura,” even knowing it was stupid and would probably damage Shade’s resolve more than it would steady it.

“It’s all right.” Shade swallowed back fear. He met Moon’s gaze

and said, "I know who I am." Then he turned, and followed Thedes over the rail.

They sprang to the first web-like support, then the next, disappearing into the dimness in the direction of the nest.

The kethel made a deep noise of amusement. Moon snarled and went back down to the hold, careful to slide the hatch closed behind him.

The others gathered nervously in the passage. He led them further down into the boat, in case the kethel was listening. "Did they say what they wanted?" Lithe whispered.

"No." Moon reminded himself that this didn't change their plans. "We need to keep working. When Shade comes back, we'll use the weapon."



But Shade didn't come back.

They finished cutting the third side of the panel, all but the thin layer that held it in place. The oil casks and the fire weapon stood ready. The day wore on into evening, and they sat in the big cabin, and waited.

Lithe covered her eyes. "What could they be doing to him?"

No one wanted to answer that question. Moon just said, "If we're right about what they want, they need him alive." He didn't think the Fell would kill Shade, not after all these turns of trying to create or find a crossbreed Raksura. But he was desperately afraid of what the Fell's guide wanted with him, and what the Fell would do to him in the meantime.

Chime twitched uncomfortably. "Maybe they're trying to... convert him. They think he's one of them—"

"He's not one of them," Saffron snapped.

They all stared at her blankly, and she hissed at them. "We were in the nurseries together with him, and Lithe, and the others. The crossbreeds. We played together, ate together, slept together. There's nothing different about them, except the way they look."

Her voice choked with emotion, Lithe said, "It's all right."

"It's not all right." Saffron hunched her shoulders. "He's a consort of my court. I should have protected him. Onyx and Malachite—Ivory—What would they say to me?"

Saffron looked so despairing, Moon had to quell an impulse to try

to comfort her. He didn't think she would appreciate it.

Wearily, Floret said, "Moon, what should we do? What if he doesn't come back? If the Fell show up and kill us all before we can destroy the sac..."

Moon groaned under his breath. He knew it wasn't the right decision, but he just couldn't do it. It didn't make sense; it shouldn't matter whether they all died together or separately. But it did matter. He had to give Shade more time. "We'll wait until morning."



No one slept much, and the time passed so slowly Moon almost wished for the bad air again, that had made it so easy to slip into unconsciousness. The morning came, and as the sun rose higher in the sky somewhere outside the sac, Moon knew they couldn't wait any longer. He said, "We have to do this now."

The others looked bleak, but no one objected. Chime sighed and reached for the saw. "I'll start—" Then Chime dropped the saw and reeled over, clutching his head.

Moon grabbed for his shoulders, easing him to the floor, his first instinct that Chime had somehow cut himself badly, though how he had managed it was a mystery. Lithe must have thought so too because she jumped up and elbowed Moon aside to lean over Chime.

But Chime gasped, "I heard it, the voice. It's close now. It knows the Fell are here, it can—Ow!" He wrenched away from Lithe, pushed himself up, and shook his head furiously, then pressed his hands to his temples.

"Chime—" Moon began, and Lithe hushed him hurriedly. She said, "I'm not sure what he's doing, but I feel like we should let him do it."

Moon hoped that "I feel" was a mentor's certainty and not an ordinary guess. He made himself sit still and wait. Floret watched Chime nervously, and Lithe flexed her claws in anxiety. Then Chime broke his stillness with a shudder. He rubbed his eyes and lifted his head. His face was drawn, his expression frightened. "Oh, that was bad."

"What happened?" Moon demanded, in chorus with Lithe.

"I heard the voice, I saw into it, and it could see the Fell. They aren't like individuals, they're like... one being." He waved a hand helplessly, still frazzled. "I know we knew that, that the rulers share memories, but this was... I couldn't stand it, and I had to push it out of my head." He told Lithe, "It was like how you look into someone's

mind, but in reverse. I wasn't sure it would work, but it did."

She patted his shoulder. "I'm glad it did. If it or the Fell had known you were there, it might have been much worse."

"What did the voice say?" Moon asked. "Could you—" Then he felt the deck sway under him, a sudden cessation of motion that must have rocked everything in the giant sac. Floret hissed, "We stopped."

Chime winced, as if bracing himself to give very bad news. "I only heard part of it. But I thought the voice said, 'Come to me now.'"

Moon pushed to his feet as the others stared at Chime. We waited too long, he thought. "Get the oil and the weapon ready. I'm going up on deck."

Lithe followed him to the base of the steps. "What are you doing? If they're taking Shade to this creature—"

"I don't know," Moon told her, and shifted to his winged form. "I want to try to see what's happened."

Moon pushed the hatch open and climbed out onto the deck. The boat jolted suddenly, so hard it almost knocked him off his feet. He looked up in time to see their guard kethel launch itself into the air, hard flaps of its leathery wings tearing the supports of the sac as it fought its way upward. Dakti still perched on the boat's railings, some watching the kethel leave, others eyeing Moon.

He looked toward the nest and saw several dark shapes take flight. He spotted the progenitor by her size and the smaller headcrest; the others were rulers. At first he thought Shade wasn't with them, then he saw one of the rulers carried someone in groundling form, a pale-skinned shape with dark hair. Shade, Moon thought in despair. Too late to stop them, too late to do anything. Then he heard a thump behind him and whipped around.

Another Fell had landed on the deck, and for a moment he thought it was a young ruler. It had a slender build and was no taller than his shoulder. Then he got a better look at its head and sexual organs, and realized it was the young progenitor he had glimpsed in the nest.

She stepped toward him, deliberately menacing. "You're left all alone."

Her voice was almost identical to the older progenitor's, but there was a higher-pitched, unformed note to it. Moon lifted his spines and bared his teeth. A glance toward the hatch told him several dakti had moved to block it. He didn't want them to get the idea to go below. He said, "Aren't you a little young for this?"

She stopped. It was always hard to read expressions on Fell, and always a mistake to attribute normal emotions and reactions to them, but he thought she was taken aback. He added, "Are you even pubescent yet? I thought you were a dakti at first."

She lunged at him and he sprang away from her and landed at the opposite end of the deck. A dakti leapt at him and Moon jumped and spun, catching it across the belly and chest with his foot claws. He landed on his feet and it dropped to the deck in a bloody heap.

A rustle ran through the other dakti, as if the quick dispatch of their companion had just roused their bloodlust.

The progenitor rasped, "Brave. But you run from me."

"I don't like you."

She eased forward. "I think I would like you. My progenitor told me the skin of Raksuran consorts is like silk."

Moon needed a rapid change of subject. "Is that all she tells you? Nothing important? She left you behind here like the dakti; am I your prize for staying out of her way?"

She straightened and her armored crest suddenly lifted and expanded out into a fan shape. Moon had never seen a Fell do that before; that he was seeing it now was not a good sign, but at least he knew he had hit a nerve. She said, "I know everything. She left me here to command her other children."

"You don't even know who the guide is."

"No one does. We know what it will give us. That is all that matters."

The Fell don't even know what they're walking into, Moon thought. Obviously the Fell's idea of judging risk was different from anyone else's. And they had dragged Shade along with them. He thought he might manage one more question before the progenitor figured out what he was doing, but she stalked forward. "The warriors haven't even come out to defend you. They must not value you very highly. Or perhaps they're afraid—" She froze in startled realization and whipped toward the hatch.

She knows. She had realized that if the warriors hadn't come out after all this jumping and growling, it was because they were occupied inside.

Moon flung himself at her as she lunged for the hatch. He connected with his claws, then ripped away from her wild grab for him. The dakti shrieked and leapt at him.

A crack and a thump sounded from inside the boat. Then something whooshed just below the hull and brilliant light flashed. The dakti halted in confusion and the progenitor went still. Then she leapt to perch on the railing.

Moon reached the rail and leaned over to see flames leap up the supports and webbing some distance below. Then what must be the second cask, open and releasing a stream of oil, bounced off another clump of webbing and fell further down, vanishing in the dimness of the sac. Then a ball of fire struck the oil-splashed material and burst into so many sparks it was like stars in the night sky. Moon winced away from the bright shock, his vision going white for an instant.

Dakti screamed and the young progenitor keened in rage. Moon's eyes cleared just as she backhanded him. The blow knocked him sprawling across the deck. Dazed, he rolled over in time to see another fireball shoot up from the bottom of the boat, angled upward toward the nest. It hit the bulky structure and exploded again into eye-searing fragments. That thing works much better than we guessed, Moon thought, stumbling upright. No wonder Delin had had it hidden away in his cabin, away from any accident.

The progenitor spread leathery wings and sprang into the air. She flapped frantically, jumping from one web support to the next, headed for the nest. Sparks still fountained up from the projectile, streaking through the wood and debris. The oil casks had all fallen below the ship, and the nest was too far above it to be splashed by the spray, but the sparks caught anyway and little tongues of flame sprung up in the dark mass. It's all that dry wood, Moon thought.

The dakti leapt into the air after the progenitor, and they headed for the nest. They were all focused on it, ignoring Moon completely. Their clutches are inside, Moon realized, and had to squelch a surge of guilt.

Floret and Saffron burst up from the hatch, ready to fight, surprised by the empty deck. Smoke rose up from below and Moon went to the rail again. He jerked back as a shape scrambled toward him, then realized it was Chime climbing up the outside of the hull, the fire weapon slung over his shoulder with a makeshift strap. Below Chime, toward the bottom of the sac, Moon saw flames flicker in the webbing and supports, obscured by the heavy smoke. A kethel thrashed around down there, trying to pull the burning material free.

Chime swung over the railing and explained, "I fell out when we forced the panel open, so I just stayed out here."

"Get the kethel!" Moon pointed.

Chime turned around and took another projectile packet out of the bag. He struck the wick against a small rough panel on the side of the weapon, and it sparked into flame. Then he pushed it into the tube, pumped the handle, and aimed down at the kethel. The weapon fired with a muted thunk, the packet bursting into a fireball as it flew through the air. "Once it's lit, you have to shoot fast," Chime muttered.

Floret reached Moon's side. "Lithe's staying below with the wounded." She hesitated. "Was there any sign of Shade?"

"Yes." Through the rapidly rising smoke, Moon saw the projectile hit the kethel's back and explode into burning fragments. It howled in rage and pain. Its flesh didn't seem to catch on fire and but the weapon had obviously hurt it. Thrashing, it dropped down into the burning mass at the bottom of the sac and vanished. And Moon glimpsed daylight, real daylight. "The sac's open."

"What?" Chime and Floret leaned over to look. Chime added, "Yes, there's a hole, I see it!"

The lower part of the sac, where the oil and burning debris had collected, was dissolving in the heat and flames. Red and orange light shone up from it, illuminating the smoky haze as if all the air was on fire. But Moon couldn't tell if the opening in the sac was big enough. "Can you lower the boat down through there?"

"I can try. If we're not too low already—" Chime stared at him, startled. "You think we can escape?"

"No," Moon told him, "but I think we should try."

Despair and hope warred in Chime's expression, but he handed the fire weapon and the bag of projectiles to Moon and darted for the steering cabin. Moon said, "Saffron, go with him!" Someone needed to guard Chime if the dakti returned.

Saffron bounded after Chime, and Moon turned to Floret. Flickers of fire glowed all over the nest, obscured by the smoke, and the Fell would never be more distracted. He pointed toward the part of the sac where the rulers had flown with Shade. "The progenitor and the rulers went that way with Shade. Try to get out through the sac and go after them. If there's no chance to help Shade get away, follow and see where the Fell are taking him." Moon was counting on the fact that Jade and Malachite and Stone were certain to track the Fell here eventually. How soon depended on whether Celadon or any of her warriors had gotten away or not. Somebody had to be here to tell them what had happened.

Floret cocked her head. "Why ask me and not Saffron? She's from his court; she has to protect him."

Moon hissed in impatience but answered her. "Because she won't leave Ivory, and you know I won't leave Root and Song."

Floret hesitated, but then dropped her spines in acknowledgement. "Yes, I do know that." She stepped away. "Good luck!"

Floret sprang into the air, flapped hard, and disappeared into the heavy smoke and haze rapidly filling the sac. The boat started to drift down, jerked as it hit a support web. Moon lit another projectile and shoved it into the weapon, pumped the lever and fired down toward the bottom of the sac. Judging by the resultant explosion, it hit something, though he couldn't see what.

He readied another projectile and fired it up at the nest. There were several packets left, and he struggled between the urge to fire them all off or wait until he could spot another kethel or a better target. The nest wasn't burning as well as the supports and webbing at the bottom of the sac, but then it hadn't been splashed with lamp oil.

A scatter of dakti appeared out of the smoke, dropped to the deck and charged him. Moon slung the weapon over his shoulder and lunged to meet them.

One flew at his face and as he slashed it aside another one grabbed for the fire weapon. It missed the metal tube but its claws caught the bag with the projectiles and yanked it off the strap. Moon lunged for it but the dakti yelped derisive laughter and threw the pouch over the railing.

Over the railing, right above the fire burning on the supports and at the bottom of the sac. Moon yelled, "Saffron, Chime, get down!" He dropped and covered his face.

The fire below made a terrifyingly loud whoosh noise and heat washed over the deck. Moon waited for the flash of light leaking between his fingers to fade, then jumped up. Dakti sprawled all over the deck, or reeled from the stunning brightness of the flash.

Slashing and tearing at the half-blind dakti, dodging their attempts to pile on top of him, Moon felt the deck sway as the craft sank down toward the bottom of the sac. Choking smoke filled the air until he couldn't even see across the boat. There must be an opening in the top of the sac somewhere, because the smoke kept streaming upward; it was the only thing that let them all keep breathing. He hoped that meant Floret had gotten out.

Heat washed over the deck and flames rose past the nearest railing. Moon slashed open the belly of the next dakti who flew at him and tossed it over the side. Flying boats, kept in the air by the sustainer that allowed them to drift on the lines of force that crossed the Three Worlds, could only go so far down to the ground. Moon had seen one get as close as twenty or thirty paces but he wasn't sure if Chime knew how to make the boat do that. If the sac was already low in the air, they could be trapped in the flames.

A dakti hit Moon from behind and knocked him to the deck. He stiffened his spines and rolled to impale it, then lifted his feet, catching another with his disemboweling claws when it tried to dive on top of him. It fell away, keening, and he rolled forward to shake the dying one off his back. He stood up and recoiled in shock.

The rest of the dakti had fled and the deck was level with the burning surface of the sac, sinking into an inferno. The intense heat stung in the cuts and slashes in his scales, seared his eyes, and the stinking smoke boiled up. Past the ring of fire, Moon could see the sac wasn't burning away nearly as fast as he would have liked. The splashed oil and falling debris had managed to catch this part of it on fire, and it was slowly eating away at the rest, but the whole sac was not going to burn.

The good part was that the boat didn't seem to be on fire either, even though fragments of burning web landed on it. The plant material it was made of must be just as resistant to burning as cutting. Moon hurried to put out the spots he could reach anyway, singeing his scales to stamp on them. He found a stray projectile packet that must have fallen out of the bag and hastily collected it; if flaming debris had landed on it, they would have discovered just how flammable the boat was.

Then suddenly the boat dropped past the fire and they were in open air, so fresh and strong and salt-scented it was like a welcome slap in the face.

It was late afternoon under a sky stained with gray clouds, and they were on the edge of a rocky coast. Gray stone slopes led down to a narrow ribbon of beach washed by waves. Dozens of islands dotted the deep blue water, some just scatters of peaks standing above the surface, others large domes of rock that supported small jungles of greenery. They covered the water as far as Moon could see.

Moon looked up at the sac, the great mottled mass looming over the little boat. From here the small size of the burning hole was frighteningly obvious; a little smaller and the boat would have been trapped.

Moon crossed the deck in one bound and reached the steering cabin. Chime had both hands on the steering post. Saffron guarded the entrance. From the slashes in her dark copper scales, she must have fought dakti as well. Moon tried to talk, realized his throat was raw from the smoke, and gasped out, "You all right?"

She nodded, coughed harshly, and managed to ask, "Where's Floret?"

"I sent her after Shade. I didn't think we'd make it out." The coast seemed empty, with no sign of her or the progenitor's group.

Chime, wild-eyed but determined, snarled, "Neither did I, believe me! Where do we go now?"

Moon had no idea; he had never expected to actually survive to this point. But there were no undistracted Fell to see which way they went, and if they could get the boat and the wounded far enough away, he could double back to look for Floret and Shade.

The cliffs ran back from the shore, turning into rocky canyons with peaks shaped by the wind into rounded pillars and arches. Moon pointed to a gap between two sloping cliff faces. "Inland, downwind, fast."

Chime leaned on the steering lever, bringing the bow around to point in the right direction. At least the wind was with them, though Moon wasn't certain if trying to open the sails for more speed was a good idea or not. All his instincts about wind and how to ride it didn't seem to apply to this craft, and he didn't want to get swept into a mountain by an errant gust.

As the boat drew further away, he saw the three kethel supporting the sac from above were flapping in confusion, the smoke pouring up over them. Two were trying to tug the sac inland and one was pointed back toward the sea. Dakti had come out the top and buzzed around them, in and out of the smoke, adding to the chaos. With the wind rushing in through the bottom, the fire had turned the whole sac into a chimney. Dealing with that should keep the kethel nicely occupied.

"How did you make that big burst of fire right as we started down?" Saffron asked, blinking into the wind. Her eyes were red and streaming from the smoke.

"Dakti got most of the projectiles and threw them in the fire." Moon decided the sail was worth a try. "Let's get the—"

"Kethel!" she snapped and pointed toward the sac.

Moon turned in time to see the big dark shape drop out of the

burning opening. It flapped its webbed wings, shaking off sparks and flaming debris, then caught the wind and headed straight for them. Moon pulled the fire weapon off his shoulder, readied and loaded the last projectile, aimed as best he could and fired.

It clipped the edge of the kethel's wing and exploded into bright fragments. The kethel roared and jerked away, then plummeted toward the rocks below. But it twisted out of the fall and flapped hard, climbing rapidly toward the boat.

That's that, Moon thought. He dropped the empty weapon, snarled, "Stay with the boat," at Saffron, and sprang to the railing. He snapped his wings out and fell into the air.

Flying against the wind slowed him down but the kethel was advancing so fast it didn't matter much; he cut straight towards its face, slashed, and then twisted away from a grab. He hadn't connected but the creature was already furious, and it had seen that he was the one who had fired the weapon at it. So when he dropped toward the cliffs it dove after him.

Moon knew he had to keep the kethel's attention and last long enough for the boat to lose itself in the mountains. He slid left and right in the wind, flapping to keep his speed up. The kethel closed with him, so near that its hot breath rushed over him.

He flew in close to a cliff, skirted dangerously along the rocky face, fighting the gusts that tried to push him into it. He felt the kethel behind him, too close, and tipped his wings up and fell to the side and away.

The kethel scraped along the cliff in a flurry of dust and rock, then shoved off it with one foot. Moon dipped down towards a rounded peak, losing track of the kethel for one dangerous heartbeat. Then it slapped him out of the air.

He bounced off rock with stunning force, just managed to pull his wings in, then tumbled down the slope in a rush of pebbles and dust. He clawed at the rock to stop his headlong fall and caught himself on a ledge.

Dazed, winded, he looked up to see the kethel climbing down the slope toward him, its big claws crunching into the gray rock, its mouth open in anticipation, fangs gleaming.

As the kethel loomed above him, something big and dark dove in and struck its back. It flattened the kethel against the cliff face and the kethel flailed and writhed to try to dislodge it. Its clawed hand slammed down next to Moon and a small avalanche of rocks rained

down on him. He scrambled along the ledge, trying to take flight but the kethel's bulk was too close and its huge wings beat frantically around him. In an instant it was going to crush him.

Then he caught the scent of familiar Raksura in the wind and somewhere below him, Jade's voice shouted, "Moon, jump!"

Moon's heart leapt, and he rolled off the ledge into open air.

Chapter Nineteen

Moon fell into Jade's arms, and she whipped away from the cliff so fast it took his breath. She crossed the narrow canyon, landed on a sharp slope, and slid down to firmer footing on a ledge. She set Moon on his feet but didn't let go of his waist; her scent washed over him, clean and welcome. He leaned into her warmth, the relief so heady it made his knees weak.

From this angle he could see that the dark shape with claws sunk deep into the kethel's back was Stone. He had bitten down into the creature's neck, cracking through its armor plates. The kethel thrashed again, its tail lashed, and it slid further down the slope.

The abrupt change of fortune had scattered all Moon's thoughts and half-formed plans. All he wanted to do was stand here and hold on to Jade, but he made himself try to catch up. "Celadon escaped?" She must have, for Jade and Stone to have followed so quickly behind the sac.

"Yes, with Delin and four of her warriors." Jade took his chin and turned his head to face her, looking into his eyes with a sharp intensity. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." It was also a relief not to have to lie. "It was Shade they wanted. The progenitor and the rulers took him somewhere. I sent Floret after him when the fire started. Chime's all right, too. Root and Song are alive but hurt."

Jade released his chin and his gaze with a hiss of relief. "When I saw the sac catch on fire, I knew it had to be you and Chime." She raised her voice to yell, "Stone, stop playing with that thing and finish it!"

Stone's snarl echoed off the canyon. With his teeth still clamped in the kethel's throat, he slid his claws forward and into the space under the kethel's armored collar. He jerked his hands down and twisted his head, and black blood fountained out and down the cliffside. The kethel struggled wildly and dragged Stone down the rocks and almost over the ledge Moon had been trapped on.

Moon told her, "The flying boat—"

"We found it before we found you. The others are there now."

“How did you get here so fast?”

“We left the warriors and Delin behind to warn Opal Night, and Stone flew as fast as he could, carrying me and Celadon and the other queens. When he had to rest, he shifted and one of us carried him. We stopped only to eat.” Jade added with more than a trace of wryness, “Malachite kept up on her own.”

“Malachite kept up with Stone?”

“Yes.” Jade bared her teeth, an unconscious grimace of irritation. “Your mother is sustained by pure rage. Why did the Fell want Shade?”

The kethel’s struggles grew weaker, turned into death throes. Stone released his grip and the kethel tumbled down, bounced off rocky protrusions and ledges, then plunged toward the bottom of the gorge. Moon answered, “They’re following a voice, something that they can hear but we can’t. It’s been telling them to come to some place along this coast. It told them it wanted a crossbreed consort; we’re not sure why.”

Jade growled in a combination of anger and dismay. “Is that what this was about?”

“I think—” Moon sensed movement above just as Jade dropped him and snarled a warning. He flared his spines and crouched. Two rulers and a cluster of dakti arrowed down toward them.

Moon had time to think they were in a bad spot, they wouldn’t make it into the air before the Fell hit them. Then something large and dark green whipped down out of nowhere to slap the first ruler out of the air and strike the second in mid-dive. Belatedly, Moon realized it was Malachite.

Her dark green scales were almost black in the daylight and her spines rippled in the sea wind. Moon hadn’t seen her outside the confines of the colony before, and it was a shock to see her now. In the wind, she was all predator.

Malachite landed on the rounded boulder above them and ripped her claws through the ruler, blood spraying as she tore his head off. The second ruler flapped out of control and slammed into the slope to the side of the boulder. Jade pounced and flattened him to the rock. Moon braced himself to spring up and take on the dakti, but Malachite tore two of them out of the air before he could unfurl his wings. Rock crunched below them as Stone scrambled up onto a lower ledge, and the rest of the dakti fled in shrieking terror.

Malachite shook the blood off her spines and turned to Jade and

the last ruler. Moon said, "Wait! Ask him where the progenitor took Shade."

Malachite's spines rattled in fury. She reached down, seized the ruler by the throat, and yanked him up as Jade pulled away. Malachite shook the ruler. Her voice was hard and cold, too controlled to be a snarl. "Where is the other consort?"

The ruler was dazed, his chest ripped by Jade's claws and the swipe that had knocked him out of the air. He growled weakly, and Malachite set a claw tip to his right eye. She said, "The others sent you out here to die, and die you will. Slowly, or quickly."

Moon saw the ruler's body quiver, and remembered what Malachite had said about the Fell: that their instinctive obedience to the female progenitors could be used against them. Almost as if the words were being drawn out against its will, it said, "An island. Not far."

Malachite squeezed, snapped its neck, then ripped its head off and tossed it and the body down the slope.

Jade's spines rippled in pure exasperation. She said, "You could have asked it which island!"

Malachite's tail lashed. She said, "They always lie on the second question." Her gaze was on the sky, but the shape flying toward them was Chime, carrying Lithe.

Malachite settled into a crouch as Chime landed awkwardly on the far side of the boulder. He and Lithe scrambled around to a perch above Moon and Jade. Chime looked frightened but determined and Lithe just looked determined. She told Moon, "We thought you'd need our help to look for Shade."

Malachite's attention turned to the retreating sac, which was just coming into view again past one of the pointed peaks. The kethel supporting it had finally gotten organized enough to head along the cliffs. Occupied as they were, they didn't give any sign that they had seen the fate of the kethel or the rulers who had come after Moon. If they had any sense they were looking for a section of beach wide enough to set the sac down so the fire in the bottom could be dealt with. Malachite tilted her head toward Moon. She said, "You're unhurt?"

"Yes. Did they tell you what happened?"

Malachite's spines dipped in assent. Still without looking down, she said, "Go to the flying ship, line-grandfather. Guard it with Celadon and the others."

Stone growled and lashed his tail. Jade said, “She’s right. You’re exhausted.”

Moon didn’t think that would do it. He added, “Song and Root are wounded, with Ivory and her warriors. If the Fell find the boat, Celadon is going to need help.”

Stone’s grumbling response rumbled through the rock. Moon interpreted it as meaning that Stone wasn’t happy, but he knew they were right. Then Stone flung himself backward in a spray of pebbles and loose rubble, caught the rising wind in the gorge, and flapped inland.

Malachite said, “Moon, go with him.”

“No.” Moon didn’t intend to argue this point. “Not until I can take Shade with me.”

Malachite didn’t respond except with a spine ripple that Moon couldn’t interpret. Jade hissed in frustration. She clearly wanted to send Moon to the boat, but the idea of siding with Malachite on any point involving him was too painful to contemplate. Moon got the idea that the only good thing about the frantic pace of the race after the sac was that none of the rescuers had had much chance to speak to each other.

With no warning, Malachite sprang into flight. Jade snarled, “I suppose she wants us to follow her,” and jumped off the ledge to take to the air. Chime grabbed Lithe and he and Moon scrambled to follow.

Moon flew even with Chime to shout, “I can take Lithe. You go back.”

“No.” Chime sounded as if he was holding onto his resolve with effort. “I heard that voice once. Maybe I can help, like what happened on the leviathan.”

Moon thought he was right, but he had wanted to give Chime the option to retreat. None of them knew what they would be facing.

As they drew near the cliffs above the rocky beach, Moon looked for the sac. It was some distance down the coast now, and the kethel were lowering it toward a relatively flat section of beach that was heavily washed by waves. The bulge of the sac scraped against the cliff and it was still releasing a plume of dark smoke. If the Fell managed to lower the sac into the surf, they wouldn’t have long until the fire was under control; depending on whatever orders the progenitor had left, they might come looking for vengeance soon.

Moon heard a shout from ahead and looked toward the sea just as a familiar scent arrived on the wind. A shape with the bright scales of

a warrior flew toward them from the array of islands just off the coast. Floret spotted them and circled, indicating that they should follow her.

Floret led them far out into the water to a rocky collection of spires. Moon landed on a damp, salt-encrusted rock below Jade, using his claws to keep from sliding down, and climbed up after the others to an uneven ledge along one of the peaks. Floret said, "Am I glad to see you all!" She pointed. "The Fell went there."

It was a tall island several hundred paces away, an uneven dome of rock covered with heavy greenery, standing high above the water. It was mostly vertical, made up of cliffs and steep slopes covered with trees and clinging vines. There was no beach built up around it; the waves crashed directly against stony cliffs. At the very top, water gleamed through the fern trees, spilling down one of the cliffs to vanish in the jungle.

Floret continued, "They flew to the top, near where the waterfall comes out, then went into the jungle. I waited a while, then flew over, but I couldn't get sight or scent of them. It was like they went into the rock somehow, but I couldn't see any caves." She dropped her spines in chagrin. "I'm afraid they left, and I didn't see them."

"You didn't have much time to search," Jade said. "They could be there somewhere."

Moon said, "Lithe, is this the place you saw?"

Hanging on to Chime, Lithe shaded her eyes to study the island. She grimaced. "I saw trees growing on cliffs, saltwater and rock, and crashing waves. But that description fits most of these islands."

"Where is that water coming from?" Chime muttered.

Jade asked, "What do you mean?"

"If it's fresh, there has to be a spring, a well, pushing it up through the rock. If it's saltwater, what's pushing it?" He glanced around and saw the queens staring at him. His spines flattened defensively. "I just think it looks odd."

But Malachite said, "As if it's not natural."

Chime nodded, relieved that she understood. "Yes, that."

Malachite crouched and sprang into the air, her claws leaving jagged scrapes in the rock. Jade protested, "We need to talk about—Damn it!"

Moon twitched with the urge to hurry, but made himself wait for Jade. Chime groaned and said, "I hope I'm not wrong."

Jade just growled in her throat and followed Malachite, and Moon, Chime, and Floret leapt after her.

Malachite had already circled over the island once and now dove down to land near the source of the waterfall. The foliage was so thick, Moon and the others had to land in the palms or ferny tops of the trees and clamber down. This surprised a number of large colorful tree crabs, which clacked their claws menacingly and skittered down the trunks, but Moon didn't catch sight or scent of anything larger. There were traces of Fell stench on the leaves, caught when the Fell had brushed against them. He couldn't pick out Shade's more subtle scent.

The ground was covered with thick, low grass and flowers with heavy succulent stems. The waterfall was fairly narrow, only about twenty paces across at this point, and emerged from a slot in the bluff just above their heads. It tumbled across a mildly sloping space where there was barely room between the trees to walk, then dropped off the edge of a cliff to catch on another slope further down and disappear into the jungle again.

Malachite perched on a rock at the edge of the drop. "Floret, where did you search?"

Her voice blended with the falling water, pitched to cut through it but not be heard above it. Floret pointed toward the bluff. "Up there, because I thought they must have gone into a cave. But their scent was already faint."

"As if they weren't here long," Jade said under her breath, and ducked under the low-hanging palms to scan the ground. Moon searched out from the waterfall, poking at the dirt under the grass and matted flower stems. The sea wind was blocked by the trees and the bluff, so if the Fell had lingered here at all, their scent should be much stronger. They didn't just stop here briefly and leave, or Floret would have seen them. They might have climbed down through the jungle to the lower part of the island, but he thought the scent trails would indicate that.

Behind him, toward the waterfall, he heard Chime say, "This is fresh water. And that opening in the rock where it's coming out is too square. Someone must have carved it."

Moon started to turn back, but a flash caught his eye and he froze, focusing on it. It was a copper disk, lying amid the tree roots. Moon eased forward and picked it up. The incised image of a flower was clearly Arbora work and would have told him everything he needed to know, but he also recognized it. It had come off the anklet

that Shade had been wearing.

He reached the waterfall again in a few long bounds, and held up the disk for Malachite to see. "Shade left a trail."



They followed the path of scent traces and strategically dropped copper disks through the thick jungle. It led down the slope and around, toward the lower reaches of the rocky bluff behind the waterfall. Playing weak coddled young consort, Shade must have pretended to stumble and fall, long enough to snatch a handful of disks off the anklet.

Following the others through the greenery, Moon realized it might not have occurred to him to do the same in Shade's position. Shade obviously took it as a given that Moon, or the warriors, or Malachite, or somebody would come after him, whether they arrived in time to save him or not. Moon would have just accepted the gut reaction that they would all think he was dead, dooming himself and leaving the queens no way to figure out where the Fell had gone and what they had been after. You have to work on that, he told himself.

The trail wound down through a nearly vertical gulley, shadowed by trees and heavy growth along its edge. The jungle was curiously quiet; insects hummed in the undergrowth but the birdcalls were distant, and Moon heard only a few rustles and clacks from the tree crabs. At the bottom of the gulley they went through a curtain of vines touched with Fell stench, and came out at the base of the rocky bluff that supported the waterfall.

For a moment it looked like a dead end. Then Moon realized the shadowed fold in the rock was a cave.

Jade reached it first and hissed with surprise. Moon arrived at her side in one bound, barely behind Malachite, with Floret, Chime, and Lithe after him.

It wasn't a cave so much as an arch, curving to lead into an open well in the rock. In the well hung heavy chains supporting what had been a system of metal stairways, suspended out over the shaft. Several of them descended a hundred paces down to the deep shadowed entrance of a cavern at the bottom. Time and weather and maybe something else had broken a few of the chains and left some of the sections of stairway to hang in various precarious positions. They would have been unusable now by any species that weren't skillful climbers. The verdigrised metal had been silvery at one point and chased with elaborate curling designs. An overhang shielded the shaft from overhead view, but let in daylight to gleam off the metal and the

mineral streaks in the rock.

“So there were groundlings here at some point,” Moon muttered. It was another indication they were on the right track, but the right track to what?

Jade cocked her head to listen intently, and then tasted the air. “There’s seawater down there. But I don’t hear waves.”

Chime leaned out to look down the shaft. “So these were for bringing groundlings up from a harbor, somewhere down through there? But there’s nothing up here.”

Malachite caught one of the chains and swung out onto it. “The metal stinks of Fell,” she commented, and started to climb down.

Jade growled under her breath and sprang for another chain. “Floret, stay up here.”

Floret made a noise of protest in her throat, but quelled it at a dark look from Jade. Floret said, “If you don’t come back by nightfall, I follow you?”

“No, you find the flying boat and tell Stone what happened.” Jade began the climb down.

Lithe’s legs were a little too short to safely make the leap, so Moon leapt for a chain and then swung one of the others into her reach. She caught it and started down. With a worried shiver of his spines, Chime sprang after Moon. “At least we’re not in the sac anymore,” he said as they started down.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Moon said. He didn’t think the Fell had been called here by groundlings, even groundlings with the ability to get out to this island and construct these stairs.

“Be careful,” Floret said, leaning out to watch their progress.

They climbed down rapidly, following Malachite’s lead.

The opening to the cave was dank and cool, the air heavy with salt and the faint scent of rotting sea wrack. The sides were steep for some distance but then opened up gradually.

The chains stopped at a wide ledge in the wall, augmented by a rusted metal platform that had been attached to the rock with a complicated series of buttresses. Malachite already stood on it, and Jade dropped from the chain to land beside her.

Moon swung down off his chain, trying to take it all in. The faint daylight fell down on a series of ledges that stood out from the rock walls, studded by metal ladders, stairways, chains, all apparently

designed to allow access further down into the cavern. Leaning out over the ledge, Moon saw dark water lap against rocks at the bottom. But he didn't see any opening to the outside.

He also didn't see, scent, or hear any sign of the Fell. They had apparently passed through this cavern on their way to somewhere else.

Lithe collected a couple of small rocks and concentrated until they emitted a soft glow of light. She handed one off to Chime to carry. Malachite leapt down to the next ledge, avoiding the rickety platform attached to it, and they followed her.

"There are carvings on these walls," Jade pointed out, as she landed on another ledge.

Moon had noticed that too. They were too old and worn down to make much out of, but he could see straight lines and ovals and sharp angles that didn't look at all like the curling floral designs on the rusted metal. "I think these used to be stone stairs, or something, that collapsed. The groundlings must have built all these metal ones to replace them."

Lithe used a chain to help her swing across a gap that was a little too wide. "But how did these groundlings find this place?" she wondered. "If Floret hadn't seen the Fell go to the island, if Shade hadn't left a trail, we might never have found it."

Chime said, "Maybe there was a city on the surface once, and the jungle grew over it."

Moon felt a chill that had nothing to do with the deep still water. He paused and looked around again at the abandoned metal devices, the rusted tools scattered on the pathway. He realized the disintegrating leather oval that lay near his claws was a groundling shoe, cast aside in headlong flight. He said, "Or the groundlings were called here, like the Fell. And they ran away. Whatever they found, they ran away from it."

They all went still for a moment, absorbing that idea. Even Malachite paused and tilted her head to consider it.

Jade hissed low under her breath. "After all the trouble they took to build these stairs... It must have been something terrible."

"It can't have killed them all," Lithe said, her spines flicking uneasily. "We'd find more remains."

Malachite leapt down to the next ledge. But she said, "Tell us exactly what you saw and heard from the Fell."

As they climbed, Moon told them everything he remembered, trying to repeat it as close to verbatim as possible. When he was done he gave Chime a prod, and Chime nervously described what he had heard of the strange voice.

They were getting closer to the bottom of the cavern. The water didn't smell stagnant, and there was enough movement in it to show that it was connected to the open sea somewhere. But the faded carving and the remnants of the original stone stairs went all the way down past the dark surface, the water lapping against them. Maybe the sea was shallower when they were built, Moon thought.

The last rusted metal stair curved into a deep alcove cut into the wall, ending on a smooth stone platform with steps that led down to vanish under the water. The Fell-stench was pronounced here, as if the Fell had spent some time on this platform.

Hanging from the curved roof of the alcove, suspended from more of the heavy chains, were several bell-shaped metal huts. The rock-lights Lithe and Chime carried reflected off the rusted metal, throwing huge shadows onto the cavern walls. Moon looked around, baffled. The trail clearly ended here.

He turned back to the huts. They looked a little like cargo lifters but were too small to take much of a load at one time. And the round sealed doors were too narrow for boxes and bales, but just right for an average-sized groundling to step through. He had a bad feeling about this.

Jade crouched to examine the edge of the platform, searching for traces that someone had passed this way. "So the Fell swam from here?" she asked, keeping her voice low. Chime and Lithe searched the dark corners of the platform, and Malachite stood still, listening for telltale splashes.

Moon saw the huts were suspended from a heavy metal beam that had been mounted to the old stone walls, and that it held chains and wheels and gears and other strange machinery, so verdigrised it was hard to tell one piece from the other. There were also dark green vines, twining around the chains, and growing down and through the roofs of each little hut. They all came from an odd plant covering the ceiling of the alcove. It looked like a fungus flower, covered with tiny white petals, spread to catch sustenance out of the damp air. This is new, Moon thought, baffled. It looked like the groundlings who had built the huts and the stairs had deliberately placed the vines this way.

Several sets of chains and vines led from the beam straight down into the water, as if those huts had dropped or been lowered below

the surface. Some of them looked like they had been that way for turns, the chains encrusted with salt, the vines white and withered. But three sets of chains had had the rust scraped off in patches, as if they had recently been cranked along the beam, and the vines... Moon leaned out over the water to touch one. It was vibrating and making faint hissing noises.

Oh, you have to be joking... Moon stepped around and caught hold of a metal handle on the nearest hut. Jade came to help him, and Chime and Lithe stopped their futile search to watch.

With Jade holding the hut by one of the protrusions on its ribbed metal surface, Moon twisted the wheel-shaped handle and pulled. The door came open with a puff of displaced air and revealed a molded, rusted interior. Moon tasted that air, and then coughed. It smelled of mold and rust and salt but it wasn't stale. A small window in the opposite wall was set with a heavy piece of faceted crystal, spotted with white stains.

Lithe came over to peer through the door. She said, "There are handholds inside." She looked up at Moon, startled, as she came to the inevitable conclusion. "Groundlings ride in this?"

It seemed incredible, but that was how everything added up. Moon nodded toward the three sets of recently used chains and vines that led below the surface. "I think the Fell took those down into the water."

Jade's expression was dubious, but she said, "Wait here, I'll take a look." She crouched down and slipped below the surface.

Moon dropped to the edge of the platform and stuck his head in the water. It was too murky to see anything but the flick of Jade's tail as she used one of the chains to pull herself down. He sat up and shook the water out of his head frills.

They waited tensely for what felt like a long time, but then Jade surfaced with a splash. She pulled herself up onto the platform, breathing hard. "I went down until I ran out of air, but I couldn't see the huts. I did see light, though, as if there's an opening to the outside somewhere down there."

Moon twitched aside as Malachite stepped up beside him. Her growl was so low Moon couldn't hear it; he just felt it in the bones behind his ear. She said, "I'll have to do as the Fell did, and take one of those... things down."

Getting inside that small metal cage was the last thing Moon wanted to do, but there was no way around it. He said, "If the Fell can

figure out how to use these things, we can.”

Malachite moved aside, and gestured with a claw at Lithe. Lithe leaned into the doorway of the open hut, then cautiously stepped inside. The hut swayed a little under her feet. Jade jerked her head at Chime, and he followed Lithe in. Her voice ringing off the hollow metal, Lithe said, “There’s just a lever.” Moon craned his neck to see her cautiously probing a slot in the rusted metal wall. The lever rested at the top of it.

Pointing up at the curved ceiling, Chime added, “That vine. Air is flowing down it. It smells like outside air.” He stepped out again to look at the plant. “It must take the air in through the petals, and push what it doesn’t need out through the vines. Sort of the way mountain-trees do with water.”

Malachite motioned for Lithe to get out of the hut. “All of you wait here.”

Jade exchanged a look with Moon. She didn’t need to speak her reservations aloud. Obviously groundlings had operated these contraptions safely but that had been a long time ago, and there was no telling if they still worked as intended.

Lithe stepped back against the wall of the hut. She said, “I’ll go with you. You might need me.”

Malachite’s spines rose in clear “obey me now” mode. Lithe persisted, “The Fell thought they needed a crossbreed to get inside this place, whatever it is. If they’re right, maybe I can get in too. You don’t want to come all this way and be stuck somewhere, unable to get to Shade.”

Malachite’s ironic head tilt suggested that Lithe’s attempt at emotional manipulation had failed. But she admitted, “Very well, little one. You’ll come with me.”

Her voice cool, Jade said, “I’ll follow in another hut. It’s safer, if something goes wrong.”

Malachite’s tail twitched with annoyance, but she was obviously impatient and arguing the point would be speaking directly to Jade. She ducked and stepped into the hut. Chime blurted, “Make sure the door seals tight.”

Lithe gave him a grim nod, and pulled the door closed. The handle spun as she tightened it from the inside. Jade murmured, “This may be a short trip if these things don’t work like we think they do...”

Then the chains jerked and the metal beam above them groaned and made a whooshing noise. The hut sank slowly into the water.

Moon said, "It works." He hoped it worked. The Fell and Shade might be dead somewhere below, trapped in the missing huts. We're going to feel really stupid if that happens.

Jade turned to the next hut, caught the handle, and pulled it to the platform. Moon held it steady as she got the door open. It looked the same as the other, if a little more moldy.

Jade stepped inside and said, "You two wait here—"

Moon stepped in after her, holding his hand under the vine growing through the roof to make sure the air was flowing. "I can come with you, or follow in another one."

Chime groaned in dismay and stepped in after him. "Me, too. Let's all go together. Then when—if we die, it'll be less... lonely."

Jade snarled. "Fine."

They pulled the door shut and closed it tightly. Then Jade took a deep breath and pushed the lever down.

There was a jolt as the hut hit the water and sank into it. A chill crossed Moon's scales, sinking down into the skin beneath as the water rose outside the thin metal walls. It covered the crystal window with murky darkness. The only light was the glow from the stone Lithe had made; it flickered, since Chime held it and was shivering hard enough to make his spines rattle. Jade said under her breath, "If we survive this..."

"You didn't have to come," Moon said. It came out harshly, mostly because his throat was tight with dread that the huts would burst too far underwater for them to find the way to the surface. To clarify, he added, "I'm glad you did."

Jade met his gaze. "I told you I would bring you back to Indigo Cloud, whatever it took."

Moon felt his spines twitch involuntarily. It warmed his heart, and other parts of him, to hear her say it. He shouldn't need to hear it after everything she had done for him, but apparently he did.

She added, "And if Malachite had really wanted to stop me, she'd just break my wing, so I'm taking that as an encouraging sign. If we get out of this alive, you might put in a word for me."

Moon nodded. "I'll try."

Chime moaned. "This is the worst thing we've ever done."

"I don't know about that." Wary of moving too much on the unsteady floor, Moon eased toward the crystal window. He thought he

had seen a flicker of light and wondered if it was from Malachite and Lithe's hut. "The parasites inside the leviathan..."

"That's true," Chime admitted, still shivering. "But—"

Moon lost the rest because of what he was seeing outside the window. Jade leaned over to look and gasped in amazement.

They had passed out of the dark water of the cavern and into sunlit blue-green depths. They must be traveling down the outside of the island, with the rocky cliffs that concealed the cavern above them. But light shone from the rock itself.

It was studded with round or oblong windows set into the shapes of pointed arches, or curved towers topped with domes. It was a city, carved into the rock roots of the island. A living city. Moon hissed in awe.

"A sea kingdom," Jade whispered. Then more uncertainly, "Is it?"

"I don't see any sealings." Moon couldn't take his eyes off the city. Chime pressed against his side and Moon moved back a little so he could get a better view. "I always thought sea kingdom cities would be more... open, more spread out. This looks like it's all enclosed." As if it was designed for people who couldn't breathe water.

"Why would groundlings build this?" Jade said, then answered her own question. "Unless they wanted a city completely safe from the Fell."

Lost in wonder, Chime murmured, "It has been, until now."

Or something worse than the Fell, Moon thought.

The hut drew closer to the city, or the rock base of the island sloped outwards toward them. They passed a long curved gallery with large windows, but Moon didn't glimpse any movement inside. Light glowed up from below, and the hut sank into a stone shaft. The water dimmed from blue-green to a deeper blue, then suddenly bubbled and frothed. Moon felt his ears pop.

The hut jerked suddenly. Moon grabbed Jade's arm in reflex and Chime grabbed his. In instinctive reassurance, Jade said, "Easy, it's all right," but her spines were twitching.

The water suddenly vanished from the window and Moon glimpsed a rounded light-colored wall, lit by a dim blue-white glow. The wall had folds and sinuous curves, like fabric, or an intricate flower. Then the hut landed hard with a hollow thump and the shock made them stagger.

Moon peered out the window. "I think we're there." He flinched at movement outside the hut, but it was Lithe, waving to him. "We're definitely there."

Jade turned to the door and twisted the handle. The seal around the door popped with released air and it swung open.

They climbed out into a large round chamber, the floor slick and wet, the air damp and smelling strongly of salt and distinct traces of Fell. The faint blue light came from polished jewels like sapphires set into the curving walls, but much of the place was in shadow.

Malachite stood a few paces from her hut, which sat in a puddle of water. She glanced pointedly at Moon, then gave Jade a dark look. She must blame Jade for bringing Moon, not that anybody would have been able to stop anybody else from coming down here, with several huts still working. Jade ignored her.

Chime stared around, then looked up and gasped.

Lithe nodded in agreement. "It's amazing."

Moon and Jade followed his gaze, and it was their turn to gasp.

At the top of the chamber, some fifty paces above their heads, water hung suspended, rippling faintly. A curious fish passed in a glimmer of silver. It was like looking up into a giant bowl filled with water.

Chime whispered, "Whoever built this place had powerful magic."

Lithe said, "And it's shaped like a flower. It's like we're standing at the bottom where the pollen is, and the petals are arching up around us. This must be what I saw when I tried to scry where we were going. From the outside, I bet it looks like the drawing I made."

Moon pivoted. The floor was flat here where the huts had landed, but towards the center of the chamber it gently sloped down toward some sort of rounded carving. The walls around them arched up in fanfolds that formed multiple petals, up to the opening at the top where the invisible barrier held back the water. Moon felt his back teeth ache with tension. He had been to places where giant flowers ate people. While this one seemed to be constructed of stone or some smooth coral, the resemblance made his nerves itch.

"Look for where the Fell went," Malachite ordered.

Jade headed for the far wall, and Moon managed to tear his gaze away from the water hanging above their heads. A short distance away, three more huts stood in drying puddles, metal surfaces still dripping with seawater, their doors open. But one hut had clearly

been here much longer.

Chime bounced over to examine that one, but Moon stopped to look into the damp, recently-used huts. The Fell-stench was thick in all three. He had been hoping to see one of Shade's copper disks, but there was nothing. He gave up, Moon thought. At least there was no sign of his body. The Fell must still believe they needed him.

He turned to the old hut. Chime crouched to look inside the open door and said, "Some of the groundlings didn't make it out." Moon looked and saw at least three bodies, now jumbled collections of bone, withered skin, and disintegrating fabric. They were all crammed into the back of the hut, as if they had huddled there before death. He couldn't tell what kind of groundling they had been. The skulls looked somewhat spade-shaped, but without hair or skin it was impossible to identify them.

Chime poked at the scatter of bones, then at the rusted tools lying on the floor. He picked one up, a long bar with a flat end. "I wonder what this is for. Prying something up, maybe?"

Moon circled the hut and looked up at the chain. It was wrapped by the withered remnants of the air-vine, which must have rotted off the main plant at some point. But the chain didn't look damaged or broken.

Chime frowned, clearly thinking along the same lines as Moon. He said, "Why didn't they leave?"

"Something got into the hut and killed them before they could seal the door," Moon said.

Chime's spines shivered. "So... there's something here besides the Fell."

Moon had thought that was a given from the beginning.

Lithe called out, "I think we found the way out!"

Chapter Twenty

Lithe, Malachite, and Jade stood on the slope above the carved flower at the center of the chamber. Moon approached cautiously, but there was something about the slope that made it easy for his foot-claws to keep traction. It looked slanted, but felt like an even surface.

The flower stood a few paces high, made of the same smooth material as the walls and floor. The petals folded into a rounded cone, with only a small opening at the top. If there was a door in it, like there had been in Lithe's drawing, it was hidden inside.

"There's no other door in this chamber," Jade told him. "If there's a way into the rest of the city, it has to be this thing."

Malachite circled it. "Flowers open."

"Have you tried poking it?" Chime asked.

"Yes," Lithe said, sounding frustrated. She crouched and ran her hand down the petals, trying to work her claws into the folds between them. "But maybe this is what the Fell needed Shade for. Maybe it will only open for a crossbreed consort. I'm obviously not crossbred enough."

"Except the groundlings opened it," Moon pointed out. "They didn't build all these things to get down here, see the flower was closed, and then run off in a panic. And some of them are dead in that hut."

"If they didn't open it, something might have come out, or opened it from the inside," Jade said.

Malachite leaned down to the flower suddenly, her face almost against the white stone petals. She tasted the air so deeply, Moon heard the rattle of her breath. "Careful," he said, part of his mind still on flowers that ate people.

She stood. "The Fell touched this, and so did Shade."

Chime was still lost in thought. "So maybe it did open for Shade because he's the right kind of crossbreed, but that won't help us. But let's say the groundlings did open it, and do what they would have done." He sprang away from the flower and loped back toward the old hut.

Malachite frowned after him, but didn't object. Lithe said, "I think I know what he means." She leaned over the flower, bracing herself on the outer petals, and peered down the narrow opening at the top. She shifted to her groundling form to pull a bead off her bracelet. Concentrating for a moment, she made the bead give off a faint glow of light. Then she dropped it into the flower opening.

Moon and Jade bumped into each other trying to see, so Malachite got there first. "Clever," she told Lithe. "There is a small slot in the bottom."

Chime returned with the tool he had found in the groundling hut, the long bar with the flat end. He said, "This tool didn't look like it was for working on anything in the hut." He braced himself on the flower, and Lithe moved to give him room. She shifted back to her scaled form, which Moon thought was a sensible precaution.

Chime carefully slipped the bar down through the gap in the top of the flower. "It fits, that's a good sign," he muttered. "I'm just going to tap the opening... There."

The flower petals started to rotate and unfold. Moon grabbed Chime by the spines and pulled him away as the flower opened almost under his feet.

Lithe's glowing bead clattered down to bounce off a ramp shaped like a vine with wide leaves. It was built into a wide shaft lit by more of the blue glowing stones. The ramp spiraled down for two turns then headed out of sight towards the interior of the city. Moon took a deep taste of the air, and caught more traces of Fell stench and a sweet scent that seemed to come from the flower itself.

Malachite said, "Bring the groundling tool," and dropped down into the opening. Without hesitation, Lithe jumped after her.

Jade growled in irritation. "It's going to close behind us. We don't know if the tool will open it from below."

"The groundlings got out," Chime said, though he looked doubtful. He shifted to his groundling form, tucked the tool though his belt, and shifted back.

Moon had come this far and wasn't stopping now. "We'll have Shade with us on the way out."

Jade muttered, "I hope so," and leapt down. Moon followed her, with a nervous Chime behind him.

Malachite and Lithe were already moving down the ramp fast but cautiously. Even though he had been expecting it, Moon winced as the flower rotated shut above them. Jade growled again and started after

Malachite.

Moon bounded down the ramp to catch up. The floor material felt oddly soft under his claws. Plants grew across the walls, white mounds of petals like the air plant up in the cave. These might be air plants too, collecting air from vines that reached all the way up through the island to the surface. He thought he could hear something very distant, a faint echo of sound. He whispered to Malachite, "Can you hear anything?" A queen as old as Malachite should have more acute senses, like Stone did.

"Voices," she replied. "Fell voices. Somewhere ahead, and perhaps below us."

At the bottom of the ramp the walkway opened up into a bridge over a large hall. Long, thin crystalline windows looked out into the deep blue of the sea in the curved wall to their right. On the opposite side was a series of arched halls with slender pillars carved into the shapes of drifting seaweed. In this strange light the soft coral-like material of the walls was touched with faint, pearlescent colors, blues, greens. And the air currents flowed from every direction; Fell stench was everywhere, with no way to tell where it came from.

Malachite snarled silently in frustration and slowly pivoted, tasting the air. The distant voices had ceased. Moon went to the edge of the bridge with the others, looking for clues. The floors seemed unmarked by any tracks, but these halls were big enough to fly through. Large round doorways dotted the interior walls with leaf-shaped platforms below some of them, but no sign of stairs or ladders. Groundlings couldn't get far into this place without ropes and grappling hooks, he thought. But the Fell and Shade would have no trouble at all and could have gone anywhere. "We're so close," he said to himself.

"We'll find him." Jade paced down the walkway, her gaze on the open halls. "We'll hear them, or—or follow the trail of dead groundlings."

"What?" Malachite whipped around. Jade pointed a claw toward a small heap of bones and rotted fabric that lay at the mouth of the farthest hall.

Jade said, "If these groundlings fled from whatever it is the Fell are looking for—"

Malachite sprang off the bridge and snapped out her wings, two strong flaps carrying her across the space. Jade grimaced at Moon and leapt after her.

Chime paused to pick up Lithe, and he and Moon sprang into flight.

They landed at the top of the hall, near the groundling's corpse. The body was stretched out, its spaded skull lying on its side, skeletal arms outstretched. Moon didn't see any reason why it should be dead. He looked up, but there was no platform or doorway above that it could have fallen out of. It was like something had struck it from behind and flattened it. Beyond the body, the hall stretched out ahead for about a hundred paces, then curved out of sight.

Malachite glanced over the body, then started down the hall. But Chime said, "Wait."

Moon looked at him and saw his spines trembled. Chime said, "I just heard the voice again. It's much clearer this time. It's saying 'I'll give you the... something. Teach you power.'" Chime's whole body shuddered, as if trying to shake off the words. "This is very creepy."

"At least we know we're on the right trail," Lithe said, looking uneasily ahead.

Malachite just started down the hall, but this time she was at least moving more slowly.

They made their way through a series of turns that could have been confusing except for the three other dead groundlings they found to point the way. One hall had a long window to the outside, revealing a few rocky underwater peaks and some drifting semi-transparent creatures like flowers with fins. Close up Moon could see the crystalline substance wasn't as clear as it looked. It was shot through with hundreds of nearly translucent fibers, like a root system. He paused long enough to lay his hand on the crystal, then jerked back. The material felt weirdly warm and alive and rippled faintly under his touch. Chime watched, wide-eyed, and murmured, "This place is even stranger than it looks."

As they reached another curving hall, Moon heard a voice and felt his spines flick involuntarily as he recognized the progenitor. He didn't need to tell Malachite that there were Fell somewhere ahead. She slowed and dropped into a crouch.

At the end of the hall was a round doorway looking down into another large chamber. It had more of the narrow crystalline windows streaking the outer wall. All the curves in their path had taken them some distance down and around. Moon thought they were on the side of the island facing away from shore.

As they edged closer, Moon got a view of the floor of the

chamber, some fifty or so paces below. He saw the progenitor and Thedes and four other rulers, and he saw Shade, but the thing they faced captured his gaze so thoroughly all he could do was stare.

In the center of the chamber was something like the bulb of the giant version of a sea-flower, that stood nearly forty paces high. It sat on a nest of vines, some dark and pulsing, others withered and dead. The big white petals at the front had been pulled down, allowing a view of the interior. It was filled with the multitude of writhing stems that in a small sea-flower caught tiny water creatures as prey. This one had prey, too.

The creature caught inside it was big, as large as Stone's shifted form. But it looked like Shade, like the image in the crystal piece the Fell had shown them. The same dark scales, the armored crest and huge mane of spines.

Malachite drew back from the doorway and so forgot herself as to exchange a look with Jade.

Lithe and Chime stared wide-eyed. Jade whispered what they were all thinking, "Can that really be an ancestor of us and the Fell?"

Malachite shook her head, but it was a gesture of grim realization, not denial. "But why is it here?"

Moon had to ask, "Why would our ancestors live underwater?"

"They wouldn't." Jade risked another peek. "Maybe this... ancestor was captured by the species who lived here, and left behind when they died."

Moon didn't buy that. "This place is designed for things that fly. We haven't seen any stairs, anywhere."

Chime nodded. "And there are these jewel lights, and all these flowers bringing air down here. They make me think of the flower lights in Emerald Twilight."

Moon thought Chime was onto something. This place was strange, but maybe not entirely unfamiliar. "They do whole trees at Opal Night."

Lithe said, "That's just an ordinary mentor's skill. At least, it is here in the Reaches. It's been passed down forever."

And everyone believed that mentors got their abilities from interbreeding with consorts. Moon thought, And Stone said it was the Arbora who made the seeds to transform mountain-trees into colony trees. Maybe this place had been transformed out of the rock of the island itself, with their ancestors' equivalent of mentors' magic.

Chime said, “But if our ancestors did build this place, who’s been renewing the spells?”

Lithe looked up at the nearest air plant, spread across the ceiling of the chamber. “Maybe they don’t need to be renewed. Maybe they’re just that powerful.”

The scales of Jade’s brow furrowed as she reconsidered. “They might have had a good reason for building it underwater. To hide something, maybe. Or hide from something.”

Lithe said, “The flower has to be magically sustaining that... person. So he was trapped inside it, all this time?”

Chime seemed uneasily fascinated by the scene below. “He must have called those groundlings to him somehow. Maybe their boat came too close.”

Lithe bounced, excited at unraveling the mystery. “But then the groundlings couldn’t let him out, because only one of his own species, or someone who was close to that species, like a Fell-Raksura crossbreed, can open the trap. Then something happened, and the groundlings fled.”

Chime bounced too. “If his body’s been sleeping, but he can still think, and he’s been here all these turns—”

“If he wasn’t raving mad when he was put in there, he is now!”

“Yes,” Malachite cut through their speculation. “But why was he put here in the first place, in an underwater prison, that only a member of his own species could unlock?”

Everyone went still, thinking over that. Moon supplied the obvious answer. “Because somebody powerful wanted to punish him, and it wasn’t safe to put him anywhere else.” The forerunner hadn’t made groundlings flee and die and Fell attack Raksura to create crossbreeds because its intentions were good.

Malachite gave him a head tilt of approval.

Jade said, “How do we know for certain?”

“Perhaps I’ll ask it, after I kill the Fell.” Malachite stood, spread her wings, and sprang out to drop to the floor of the chamber.

Chime and Lithe recoiled in shock. Jade made a choking noise that seemed to combine rage and astonishment. Moon just stared. “Didn’t expect that,” he admitted. In hindsight, he probably should have.

Jade snarled and leapt after Malachite, and Moon followed.

He landed on the floor, every nerve alert. The progenitor and the rulers had swung to face them at Malachite's sudden appearance. The Fell were all in their winged forms but Shade was still a groundling. Thedes had caught him by the neck and held a clawed hand to his throat, probably the only reason Malachite hadn't started ripping Fell apart yet.

Shade hadn't shifted because he looked like he was about to drop from exhaustion. His pale skin was gray-tinged and there were dark bruises under his eyes, his clothes were torn and filthy; he stared at Malachite as if he thought he was hallucinating her. Of course, Moon thought, they haven't been feeding him. Faced with the choice of groundling meat or nothing, Shade must have chosen nothing. The Fell could have forced him to eat by threatening Moon and the others, but they had wanted him weak.

Malachite paced deliberately toward the progenitor. Moon had never seen anyone or anything look at a Fell like that. Like Fell were intriguing prey, tricky to catch, but not impossible.

The progenitor didn't react, though Moon thought he could see tension gather in her body. The progenitor said, "You hate us very much. We must have done something terrible to you."

"You took my consort and destroyed my court." Malachite tilted her head and smiled. "Don't try to get inside my mind. I might let you."

Moon sensed more than saw an uneasy stir among the rulers. Malachite wasn't acting the way they expected, and it unnerved them. It's not a pose. Malachite's not afraid, and the Fell know it. He wondered if that was what Malachite had been doing for the turn she had stalked the Fell flight. Learning about them, learning how to resist their influence to the point where it didn't exist for her, learning contempt for them instead of fear. Maybe that was the key to defeating the Fell, that your mental attitude was everything.

The progenitor didn't draw back, but Moon could sense her regroup. She said, "Why are you here? It does not want Raksura."

"You know why I'm here. You have something that belongs to me." Malachite didn't look at Shade, holding the progenitor's gaze as if holding her captive, but her meaning was clear. "Why haven't you let your guide out yet?"

"Perhaps we never meant to."

Malachite's spines rippled in amusement. "This is a long way to come for nothing."

“Other flights found the way for us. Our part was easy.”

Moon threw a look at Jade and saw her attention was entirely focused on Thedes and Shade. She’s waiting for an opportunity. But Thedes might be too old and clever for that. He would know the only thing keeping the Fell alive was the threat to Shade.

Malachite said, “You took advantage of their failures.”

The progenitor inclined her head. “Yes.”

“So why have you changed your mind?”

The progenitor said, “The guide told us it could teach us new powers, give us powerful weapons to defeat the prey who have weapons of fire and projectiles. It told us it had slept for a long time, and only recently woken, and was anxious to help us eat the world.” That was hardly surprising. The only thing the Fell would be truly interested in were ways to eat groundling cities more efficiently, with less danger to the progenitors and the rulers.

“And to destroy Raksura,” Malachite added.

The progenitor seemed to feel that was just an extra benefit. “And that. But we are here and it will not teach.”

Moon couldn’t keep his mouth shut any longer. He said, “Ask it what it offered the groundlings to get them here. They didn’t let it out, and it killed them.”

The progenitor didn’t look at him, but answered, “The prey could not let it out. It did not know then that the cage could only be opened by one of its own species.”

A strange prison. It could only get free if another member of its species came for it. And nobody came, Moon thought. If whoever had trapped it here had been trying to make a point, then the point had certainly been made.

Malachite hadn’t taken her gaze off the progenitor, but Moon sensed more of her attention had shifted to the creature trapped inside the flower. She said, “But what did it offer the groundlings? The same thing it offered you?”

The progenitor said, “We are people. They were prey.”

That must be a “no,” Moon thought. “Then why haven’t you let it out already? You know it’s a trick, now. You know it won’t teach you powers. You know there aren’t any weapons here. This place is empty. If there were any weapons, the groundlings took them when they fled.”

Malachite must have decided she had heard enough. In the same even tone, she said, "Give us Shade, and we'll leave you alive."

The progenitor was equally calm. "You would never leave us alive."

Malachite showed her fangs in approval. "You aren't as foolish as you appear."

Her voice trembling with urgency, Lithe said, "Malachite, why hasn't the forerunner tried to stop us from having this conversation?"

There was a moment of stillness. The Fell didn't react.

Malachite's eyes narrowed. "Shade, did anything happen when you first came into this room?"

"The flower opened," Shade said, his voice a weak croak. "I don't think that was a good thing."

Uh-oh, Moon thought. Chime whispered anxiously, "Maybe it doesn't need anything but Shade's presence. Maybe it's been waiting for the spell, or whatever it is, to finish."

Malachite must have agreed. She snarled. "Give me Shade and we will all leave here alive."

There was no warning. The flower opened. It was like a too-near lightning strike, like the explosion when the dakti had thrown Delin's bag of projectiles into the fire, but without light or heat. A wave of invisible force crossed the chamber, flattening everything in its path. It knocked Moon onto his back and bounced him off the floor. He flashed on an image of the dead groundlings up in the hall, stretched out flat, and the others huddled in the hut they hadn't been able to escape in.

The force passed on, leaving Moon gasping for air, shivering in reaction. He rolled to one elbow, trying to get his body to work enough to stand. His blurry vision cleared and he saw everyone sprawled on the floor, including the progenitor and the rulers. The Fell who had been closest to the flower lay like they were dead, but he saw with relief that the Raksura were dazed but trying to move. Then he saw the forerunner.

It stood in front of the sea-flower, watching them. He couldn't read any emotion in its face or spines; it might have been a statue.

Malachite suddenly pushed to her feet, spines flared, breathing rough. She said, "What are you?"

One of the rulers rolled over and stood, its movement jerky and abrupt. Its jaw opened and it rasped out, "I am your ancestor."

Malachite's spines rippled in what Moon could only interpret as wary disbelief. He felt cold settle in the pit of his stomach. The forerunner was speaking through the ruler, the way rulers could speak through dakti and kethel.

Chime and Lithe both managed to sit up, leaning against each other for support. Shade still lay sprawled near the unconscious Thedes, and out of the corner of his eye Moon saw Jade push herself up to her hands and knees and stretch to grab Shade's ankle. One eye on the forerunner, she pulled Shade toward her. The creature didn't try to stop her.

Dazed, Shade started to fight, then opened his eyes enough to see her. He struggled toward her and Jade pushed him behind Moon, then stumbled to her feet. Moon managed to sit up all the way, but he didn't think he could stand yet. "Are you all right?" he whispered to Shade. Shivering, Shade nodded against his shoulder.

The ruler said, "I've waited so long. They meant me to sleep forever, but I woke." Its eyes were closed, its face and body slack; it looked dead. The other Fell stirred weakly. The progenitor lifted her head, her tail lashed, and she fixed her dark gaze on the forerunner.

Jade flicked a quick glance at Moon and he gave her a sharp nod. He could move if he had to and help the others.

Malachite studied the creature intently. "That's what you told the Fell," she agreed. "Why didn't the groundlings let you out? You called them to you, taught them how to find this place, to use the air plants to reach you."

Yes, that was what Moon was wondering, too. This was not going how an encounter with an ancestor of their species should go, as far as he could tell. Maybe Lithe and Chime were right and the forerunner was raving mad. Maybe it was worse than that.

The dead ruler said, "They couldn't solve the puzzle. You are far more clever."

Jade said bluntly, "So the groundlings ran away and died."

Lithe shook her head. "And we didn't do anything, didn't solve any puzzle," she said, her voice a bare whisper.

From behind Moon, Shade whispered, "Neither did the Fell. They just stood there, talking to it, but I couldn't hear its answers."

Jade said, "It's lying. The only thing it needed to get out was for Shade to come close enough."

The ruler said, "I will help you defeat these terrible creatures, all

across the worlds.”

Malachite hadn't looked away from the forerunner but Moon felt she knew exactly where they all were, and was thinking furiously. She said, “Then why have you conspired with them all this time?”

“I had no choice.” There was emotion in the words now, and the Fell ruler trembled as the voice was forced from its throat. “The Raksura could not hear me, and I had to be free.”

Malachite was unmoved. “We have paid dearly for your freedom.”

“I will repay my debt. I will help you destroy the Fell.”

Malachite tilted her head, but her expression gave nothing away. Jade said, “Yet you told the Fell you would help them destroy us.”

“I had to lie. Have you not lied to these creatures, to survive?”

That hit home for Moon. But looking past the captive Fell, at the forerunner itself, he thought, It stands so still. Why doesn't it move?

It continued, “Come with me to the surface of the island. I have proof there, hidden weapons and resources. I will give them to you.”

Lithe nudged Chime. “Chime, what is it?”

Chime was staring at the creature, squinting as if it was hard to see, though it wasn't more than twenty paces away. “It's not... It isn't... This is not its true form.” His voice trembled. “I can see two of it.”

Malachite hissed out a breath. She asked it, “Are you deceiving us? What is your true form?”

The progenitor lunged upright. Moon flinched back, pushing Shade behind him, but the progenitor charged the forerunner. She struck it in the chest, hard enough to stagger it back. The rulers sprang at it in her wake—and it changed.

Its body softened and blurred and flowed into another shape, larger, dark and fluid, with more limbs than it had had before. It lifted a double set of wings and bared an enormous array of fangs though its body was so amorphous Moon couldn't tell where its mouth was. It flung one of the rulers away, the body shredded into bloody fragments.

Malachite spun and snapped, “Go!”

Moon grabbed Shade and sprang for the door. Shade's groundling body was heavier than Moon had been expecting and he hit the bottom edge of the doorway, just able to catch it with his claws.

Shade curled against him, holding on with all his remaining strength, holding his breath as if that would help. Moon hauled them both up into the corridor and Shade gasped with relief.

Lithe hit the wall below him and scrambled up without difficulty, then Chime, who must not have moved fast enough to satisfy either Jade or Malachite, flew over their heads and bounced off the floor. The queens landed an instant later and they all bounded down the corridor.

That was Moon's first chance to think it through and he realized Malachite was right; they had Shade, all they needed was to make it out of here. Hopefully the creature would slow down to kill all the Fell before it came after them.

Chime gasped, "I don't think that thing is our ancestor."

Even if it was, Moon didn't want anything to do with it. Then he heard a crash behind them, with a whoosh and a rush of water, as if a waterfall had just exploded into the chamber. Oh, no, Moon thought. It couldn't be that stupid—

Malachite growled, "Don't stop."

Moon asked Shade, "Can you see anything?"

Shade looked back over Moon's shoulder and reported breathlessly, "It must have broken the windows in the chamber. Maybe it won't—No, the water's coming right toward us!"

The opening into the first big hall wasn't far ahead, but the floor leading from it dropped down, offering no refuge from the onrushing sea. Moon could feel the spray on his back.

Jade raced ahead and leapt up, clung by one hand to the top of the arch and held out the other. Moon sprang for the arch, caught it with his claws, but Shade's weight kept him from using the momentum to swing up and around. He grabbed Jade's free hand and she pulled, and they both scrambled up onto a ledge no wider than his feet. Chime landed an instant later, scrambled up with a desperate cry.

Malachite hit the arch then, with Lithe clinging to her, and then the water struck them.

It rushed out below in a white-capped torrent, pouring down and into the hall. Jade crouched and grabbed one of Malachite's wrists, and Chime grabbed the other. Still holding Shade, Moon had to watch helplessly. There was just no room to brace themselves and Jade and Chime couldn't hold on for long.

Then Lithe climbed around and up Malachite's back, got her

claws into the ledge and pulled herself up next to Chime. Without the extra drag, Malachite clamped her claws into the ledge, constricted her body, and popped up out of the water like a jumping fish.

As Malachite hooked her claws into the wall, Jade asked, “Where now?”

“We make our way back to the outer door.” Malachite scanned the hall. “There’s a perch across there. We should be able to reach that.”

Jade’s spines flicked in assent, and she turned to Shade. “After you and the Fell came down here in the metal huts, the flower-door opened when you touched it?”

Shivering, Shade nodded. “It did. You think it won’t open for the creature?”

“I hope not.” Jade glanced at Malachite. “But if the water has already filled up the ramp to the outer door—”

“I know,” Malachite said, and for once she didn’t seem annoyed that Jade existed. “Once the water fills this place and the pressure eases, we may be able to swim through it.”

Some of us can swim through it, Moon thought. From his own experience he knew Aeriats could hold their breath underwater for far longer than most groundlings, and he knew Jade and Malachite would be just as strong in the water as they were in the air. But Arbora were built differently. And Shade was still unable to shift and seemed to be getting weaker by the moment; his skin felt chilled through his clothes.

Chime said, “Wait.”

They all looked at him. He was half-crouched at the end of the row next to Lithe. He took a deep breath, as if bracing himself for their reaction, and said, “I don’t think this is real.”

Jade and Malachite frowned. Moon decided to get the question in before anyone else did. He asked, “Which part isn’t real?”

“The water.” Chime sounded stricken. He scooped up a double-handful. “When it’s in my hands, I can’t see it.”

Lithe reached down and touched the water in Chime’s cupped hands, and rubbed her fingers together. “I can feel it. I think I can feel it.”

Heartened that they hadn’t dismissed him out of hand, Chime said, “I think... that creature knows we have Shade, that he can open the outer door. It’s chasing us there. It’s going to follow us right out.”

Shade said suddenly, “My clothes are dry. Moon, your scales are wet, but my clothes are dry.”

Moon felt the sleeve of Shade’s shirt. The light material wasn’t clinging damply, wasn’t spotted with water. If the water was an illusion, the creature could have missed a few details. “Chime, I think you’re right.”

Jade was still frowning, but she said, “You were right about that creature, Chime. There was two of it, in a way. Maybe it isn’t even a true shifter, maybe it was just making us see it as one of our ancestors.”

Lithe said, “That would explain why only a forerunner—or someone close to them, like a crossbreed—could let it out. If our ancestors imprisoned it here—”

Malachite dragged them back to the point. “The water was real enough to kill the groundlings. The creature was still trapped inside the flower, but something made them run, killed them when it caught them. If we can’t make ourselves believe the water isn’t real, it will kill us too.”

Chime nodded anxiously. “That’s the part I don’t have any ideas about.”

A sudden dark stirring in the water below them cut off that line of discussion. Malachite snapped, “The ledge, now!” and grabbed Lithe.

Moon waited, knowing they had to go one at a time, but as Malachite sprang into the air, Jade said, “Moon, then Chime, go!”

There was no time to argue. Moon crouched, leapt, and flapped for all he and Shade were worth. He made it to the perch across the hall, snapping his wings in on the landing. Malachite caught his shoulder to steady him. Chime was right behind him, but as Jade sprang off the ledge, a dark clawed arm shot up from the water to reach for her. Moon gasped but she twisted at the last instant and flapped across the hall. As she landed, Moon snarled, “It almost had you!”

She snarled back, “I know.”

Malachite said, “Children, quiet.”

Moon followed her gaze and saw the dark shape move just under the surface. Something about it was more like a swarm of sea creatures than a single being. And it seemed to have more limbs than it had started out with. It fetched up against one of the seaweed-carved pillars and climbed out of the water, then swung to face them.

Chime made a strangled noise of horror in his throat.

Moon stared, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. The creature had killed the Fell, but had merged their bodies with its own, somehow. Clawed arms, legs, a leathery wing, a tail hung from the fluid shape of its back and sides. The progenitor was attached to its chest, her body partially melded with it. Moon could glimpse one of her wings, half unfurled, through the creature's gray semi-transparent flesh. Then her right arm, still free, twitched and she tried to lift her head; she was still alive.

Malachite hissed slowly, in mingled disgust and shock. Moon thought, The forerunners or whoever built this place left this creature buried alive here for a reason. They wanted to punish it for all the turns left in the span of the Three Worlds for a reason. And whatever we do, we can't let it get out.

The progenitor said, "Why do you run? They attacked me. I had no choice."

Moon felt sick. Her voice had a hollow effect, almost an echo. It was clear who—or what—was actually doing the speaking.

Jade called back, "You lied to the Fell and you're lying to us!"

"I had to be free. Take me to the surface, I will still give you powers—" The progenitor choked, then her voice changed, dropping the strange hollow quality. "This place was first a fortress against it, then its prison when it was defeated."

"That was her," Shade whispered, horrified.

Malachite shouted, "How did they defeat it?"

One clawed limb grabbed the progenitor's remaining arm, and ripped her out of the creature's own body. It snapped her spine and tossed the corpse into the water. Then it dove in, vanishing under the swirling foam.

Malachite ordered, "That ledge, go!"

They made it in a mad scramble, flapping hard, newly terrified of touching the water. They assembled on the ledge near the archway that led into the next hall, the one they had to get through to reach the ramp and the outer door. This ledge was wider and higher above the water, but wouldn't offer much protection if the creature came at them.

Moon set Shade on his feet and they both slid down the wall to a crouch. Chime, huddled at the other end of the ledge, was shivering almost as badly as Shade. Lithe squeezed in between Malachite and

Jade, her spines flat in fear; Moon didn't feel so good himself. The creature was using the illusory water to conceal itself, which made it nearly impossible for them to reach the outer door without letting it out. It could come at them at any moment, escape from its prison... What did the progenitor say? A fortress, and then a prison? Moon blurted, "It's afraid of water."

Jade's and Malachite's attention snapped to him. Jade said, "Because it's using the illusion of water against us?"

Lithe's frightened expression turned intrigued, and Chime's spines shivered in excitement at the thought. Chime said, "Because our ancestors put it here?"

Moon said, "The progenitor said that this place was a fortress against it and then its prison, and then it killed her. It can't talk to us without her, so shutting her up was more important than trying to convince us to help it. Maybe she was trying to tell us how to kill it."

Jade wasn't convinced. "But why would she do that?"

Moon started to answer, then shook his head in frustration. He couldn't put it into words, the way the Fell became weirdly attached to their Raksuran prey. The Fell often seemed as if they were having a relationship with you that they expected you to reciprocate, and they became angry when you didn't respond the way they thought you should. Maybe they were, but their complete lack of empathy prevented them from understanding the reactions and feelings of any other type of being. He just looked at Malachite and said, "She had Shade with her all that time. You know how they get."

Malachite's gaze turned thoughtful. "That only makes sense if we're right about the water being a hallucination."

"I know I'm right about that," Chime said, more life in his voice. "And maybe that's what this thing wanted with the groundlings. To make the huts as a way for it to get out of here. Maybe it knew all along they couldn't set it free. It was waiting for the Fell to make crossbreeds, but once it was out, it needed a way to get to the surface without touching the water."

"That could be it," Lithe said. "If the forerunners had a way to get in and out of this place without swimming, they must have destroyed it when they left, to make the prison more secure."

"So we let the water in," Moon said.

"We'll have to swim to the surface?" Chime shook his spines. "Can we do that?"

Jade said to Malachite, "Not all of us."

His voice rough and weak, Shade said, "I can try to shift. Maybe if I wait till the last moment—"

Moon was pretty sure Shade was lying to keep them from reconsidering the plan. If he could shift, he would have done it by now.

Jade must have had similar doubts. She said, "If we distract it by letting the water in, we could get back up the ramp to the huts."

Malachite said, "Yes, that's still our best way out." Her gaze was on the roof of the hall, on one of the round windows in the curve of the dome. The sea outside pressed against it, the water darker as if clouds had covered the sun somewhere far above them. "The rest of you get ready to go."

"You think you can just tear through it?" Jade asked. "If more than one of us—"

"What about—" Chime began.

Water boiled in front of them. Moon pushed in front of Shade, instinctively protecting the one member of their group who couldn't shift. The limb caught him across the shoulder and knocked him off the ledge and into the water.

Moon fell right through the surface, struggling against the illusion. He knew he was falling toward the floor of the hall, that there was no water around him, but for a heart-stopping moment his body was unable to do what his brain told it. He closed his eyes and forced his wings out, flapped with all his strength. He felt his body lifting up, a moment before he collided with a soft surface. He bounced off, slid down, and hooked his claws into it. He opened his eyes to see he was holding onto one of the seaweed-carved pillars, above the illusory water.

He looked back for the others and the creature. The water churned, and Chime clung to the wall above the ledge but Moon couldn't see anyone else. He almost flung himself toward them but somebody had to let the real water in.

He swarmed up the pillar, and leapt from it to the curved roof, sunk his claws into the soft material and climbed across it toward the round window. It was the same as the other one, the crystalline substance webbed with translucent fibers. He struck at it with his claws and jerked back, anticipating the rush of water. His claws barely scored the tough material. You should have known this wasn't going to be easy.

He swung out onto the window and dug his claws in, using all his

strength, trying not to think about what was happening below him. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and jerked away, but it was Chime with Lithe clinging to his chest. Chime gasped, “Malachite is distracting it, Jade has Shade. We’re supposed to be with her but Lithe had an idea.”

Moon looked down, but couldn’t see anything but boiling water below the arch where the walkway was. Jade, be careful. The creature would be after Shade, knowing it could use him to get through the outer door to the groundling huts. Grimacing, Lithe stretched to reach the clear material of the window. She said, “This didn’t work on the groundling boat, but our ancestors made this.”

Moon didn’t understand what she meant until the crystalline substance started to warm under his claws. He dug them in again and leaned back, bracing his feet on the window. The material felt more permeable, but it still wasn’t tearing. Chime huffed in frustration, then climbed down next to Moon. “Please don’t kill us with your spines,” he said and wrapped an arm around Moon’s waist. Lithe hooked an arm around Moon’s shoulder.

Moon said, “All right, together. One, two, three!”

They all threw their weight back at once. And a small hole tore under one of Moon’s claws, saltwater squirting through it. Moon made a desperate hiss and said, “Again. One—” Then the whole window ripped apart.

The rush of water blew them down into the hall. They were caught in the torrent, as if the whole world had turned to water, and Moon couldn’t imagine how they had ever thought the creature’s illusion of an onrushing sea was real.

Still holding on to each other, they bounced off various hard surfaces and then tumbled to a stop, crammed into a corner. Moon shook the water out of his frills and tried to disentangle himself from Chime and Lithe. They had fallen into the bottom of the hall and the water was pouring in, streaming across the floor toward them. The illusion of water was gone and rapidly being replaced by the real thing. Moon managed to stagger upright, then something grabbed his arm from behind.

He whipped around in alarm, but it was Malachite. She shoved him toward the base of the walkway and reached to drag Chime to his feet, then Lithe.

Moon staggered through the rising water toward the nearest support for the walkway, looking up, trying to see where the creature was. There was a dark blot at the top of the hall that had to be it; it

had retreated away from the water, but he doubted it would give up that easily.

Malachite landed behind him, with Chime in one hand and Lithe in the other, both still dazed. Moon took Chime, pulling him against his side. Chime revived enough to loop his arms around Moon's neck, Malachite slung Lithe over her shoulder, and they both started to climb.

They reached the walkway. Moon saw Jade and Shade waiting at the start of the ramp, both unharmed, and felt dizzy with relief. "I told you to go on," Malachite said, her voice a growl.

Jade just bared her teeth at her. Shade said, "I wouldn't go without—"

High in the roof, something made a noise like a high-pitched shriek, like tearing metal. Moon looked back to see the rent in the window running into the roof below and growing rapidly larger. He yelled, "Run!"

Jade snatched up Shade and they bounded up the ramp. When they reached the outer door, Lithe had recovered enough to be set on her feet, though she was still wavering a little. Chime could stand on his own but kept squinting and holding his head. They all watched anxiously as Jade boosted Shade up. He touched the flower blocking the doorway.

Moon held his breath, but it opened just like they thought it would.

They climbed and swung up through the opening, into the big chamber. It was a relief to see the huts still there, to see the invisible barrier still held the water back. Malachite and Jade went last, and both stood beside the flower until it closed. Moon hissed out a relieved breath. Jade nodded agreement. She said, "Let's hurry. That thing will be desperate and the further we get away the better."

Malachite started toward the first hut. "Get in, Lithe. You too, Shade."

Lithe stepped into the hut, shifted to her groundling form, and sat down heavily on the floor. Shade followed and sank down next to her.

Jade said, "You go with them. I'll take Moon and Chime in the other—"

Moon heard a faint sound behind him and spun around. The flower was rotating open. He fell back a step as the creature's dark form flowed up out of it. One clawed limb was holding a rusted metal bar—the tool the groundlings had made to open the flower.

Chime whimpered in dismay. "I dropped it, when it knocked you off the ledge, I shifted for an instant and I dropped—"

Moon figured they could sort that out later. He grabbed Chime by the spines and shoved him into the hut, then slammed the door shut and twisted the handle. He shouted, "Pull the lever!"

Malachite and Jade braced themselves, spines flared, ready to battle to the death. The creature flowed toward them.

Then the creature froze, and the lump on top of its body that seemed to be its eyes swiveled upward. Moon looked up and saw the barrier trembling like a pool that a rock had been dropped into. He thought, Oh, clever. One last defense. Their ancestors might have meant to punish the thing by imprisoning it forever, but they had left a trap if it ever got this close to escape.

The transparent barrier shivered and started to give way, releasing first a shower of water like a light rain. It struck the creature like acid, like burning molted metal. It flung its limbs wide in a silent scream and its body started to dissolve. Pieces of the dismembered Fell tumbled out and scattered across the floor. Then its flesh ran in gray-black streams and it melted away.

Moon realized later the green blur was Malachite shoving him down, flinging Jade on top of him, then throwing herself on both of them. The shock as the full weight of the water crashed down still knocked him out.

He opened his eyes, saltwater burning in his throat and lungs, choking him. For a moment all he knew was that something was holding on to him, then his blurry vision cleared enough to show him that it was Jade. She had him clutched to her chest with one arm, the other holding onto to Malachite's tail.

Malachite was half-climbing, half-swimming up the chain and vine attached to the hut. Moon looked down and saw the round metal roof moving upward. Chime must have finally thrown the damn lever, he thought, numb. Jade was kicking her feet to help Malachite along, and Moon forced his limp legs to move.

Moon blacked out again before they reached the surface. He came to when someone dropped him on a hard stone surface and then punched him in the stomach. Moon's lungs tried to turn themselves inside out as he coughed up water; someone flipped him over and he went to his hands and knees, choking out the last of it. The first real breath was sweet.

He shook his head and saw Jade crouched next to him, being

messily sick. Moon's body felt like his blood had turned to lead, but he reached over and squeezed her wrist. He was exhausted and wanted to shift to groundling more than anything, but he knew the longer he could hold on in this form, the faster his abraded lungs would heal.

He looked up and saw Malachite standing over them. They were on the platform in the cave, where the huts were stored. She was watching the water with concentrated intensity. Then the surface churned and the hut lifted out, its chain clanging in the support beam.

The door swung open as soon as it was clear of the water and Chime stared anxiously at them. "They're alive," he shouted.

They were. Moon decided he had time to pass out again while the others were sorting out the situation, and did.

Chapter Twenty-One

Malachite had to send Chime up to the entrance of the cave to bring Floret, so she could help them get out. In the end, Chime carried Moon, Floret carried Lithe, and Malachite carried Shade. Jade managed to fly on her own, out of pure stubbornness.

As they crossed back to the mainland, Moon still felt woozy and sick. He spotted the sac, resting in the waves some distance along the beach. The smoke had decreased to a thin stream and only a few dakti circled above it. The flight would have felt the deaths of its progenitor and what was probably most of its rulers. The young progenitor might have a chance to rebuild, or the remaining kethel might just kill her in a frenzy of grief and confusion. Either way, the flight was in no shape to make the long journey south to tackle Opal Night. And we're in no shape to tackle it, Moon thought. He hoped the Fell decided to cut their losses and leave.

It took them some time to find the flying boat, even though Malachite knew in what direction it had been traveling. The sky was darkening toward evening when they located it; the strong wind off the sea had pushed the little craft swiftly inland. As they banked down toward it, Moon saw Stone on the deck, watching their approach. Two daughter queens of Onyx's bloodline were on look-out, one perched on the small basket atop the mast, and the other on the steering cabin roof.

Chime followed Malachite and Jade down to land near the cabin, where Saffron gripped the control pillar with a determined expression. She sagged against it a little, profound relief crossing her normally hard expression. Stone just looked them over briskly, checking for wounds. "Are the Fell following you?" he said. "This damn boat stinks so bad, I can't tell if their scent's on the wind."

Chime carefully set Moon on his feet. Keeping one hand on Chime's shoulder to steady himself, Moon shifted to groundling. He didn't immediately collapse, so he took that as a good sign. He said, "Don't think so," and his voice came out in a rough, barely audible wheeze.

Jade rubbed her eyes, her spines drooping from exhaustion. "I haven't caught any Fell scent since we left the coast." Her voice was

better than Moon's but not by much.

Stone frowned. "You need to get below."

Moon couldn't agree more. Malachite was already carrying Shade down to the hold, Lithe at her heels. With a worried frown, Jade glanced at Floret, who had shifted to groundling and stretched full-length out on the deck. "Floret, are you all right?"

Floret assured her, "I'm fine. I just don't want to go down to the hold right now. We spent enough time there."

Stone said, "I'll keep an eye on her."

As they limped after Malachite, Jade asked quietly, "Was it very bad?"

Chime said, "It was terrible."

Moon said, "It could have been worse."

Celadon met them at the bottom of the stairs. "Everyone's all right?" she asked, her worried gaze going from Shade in Malachite's arms to Moon, who leaned heavily against the wall to steady himself on the way down.

"Except for almost drowning," Lithe told her, as she started across the cabin to where the wounded lay. She crouched down to touch Ivory's forehead, looking anxiously over the others. "I need to make a simple for their lungs. And Shade's been starved. Chime, could you—"

"I'll start heating water." Chime headed for the metal stove.

Malachite set Shade down and helped him sit. He still looked far too pale, the bruises under his eyes deep-set and his cheeks sunken. Moon sank down next to him and wheezed, "There's food in that basket. Fruit and bread."

Celadon hurried to get it. Jade started to pick up a blanket, then sniffed it and dropped it in disgust. Everything aboard the boat still stank from the combination of Fell and smoke, though the hold didn't smell nearly as bad as it had before, with the mountain wind moving through the vents.

His voice a weak rasp, Shade said to Malachite, "I found out something I need to tell you. Forty turns ago the guide, that thing, told some Fell to go after the Opal Night colony in the east first."

Malachite went still, staring at him.

Shade continued, "The progenitor told me. They weren't related to that flight so they didn't know much about what happened, only what the creature told them, though she tried to pretend like she did."

He turned to Moon. "You were right. They always lie the same way, and after a while you can tell."

Celadon sat down, opening the basket of provisions, listening in increasing confusion. Her voice still rough, Jade said, "But why Opal Night?"

"Because it thought Opal Night had more in common with the forerunners, because of where the colony was outside the Reaches, that it was the oldest and closest one to the city where the creature was trapped." Shade shivered, and wrapped his arms around himself. "The progenitor said the guide could sense a lot about Raksura, but we didn't even know it existed. She seemed to think that was just because the Fell are superior." He added, with irony, "I guess she didn't think that at the end."

Malachite took the provision basket from Celadon. "We'll talk of it later. Eat." Her voice was wheezy too, a reminder that she wasn't invulnerable.

With thinly disguised impatience, Celadon said, "Can somebody tell me what happened?"

Moon started to speak, but the first breath turned into a coughing fit. Digging packets out of her satchel, Lithe said, "Chime and I will tell it. The rest of you be quiet and rest."

It sounded like a good idea to Moon.



The simple Lithe made was one normally used for lung ailments, and it made Moon's sore lungs and abraded throat feel better immediately. It also made the rest of the evening and night pass in a somewhat surreal sleepy haze.

He woke a few times to see Shade sleeping in a huddle under Malachite's protective wing, and once to find himself curled up against Stone's side. He remembered a vague conversation where Chime told him that they were going to owe Delin even more repairs, since while taking turns steering the boat, the two young daughter queens had scraped it against the rocks three times. Moon thought Delin was going to be more worried about the hole in the hull. But there was no sign of the Fell. The night was a dark one, with the half moon and the stars obscured by clouds, and the wind drove the boat hard.

Moon woke at dawn next to Shade, with Lithe, Saffron, and Floret sleeping nearby. He got to his feet, carefully picked his way around them, and went up to the deck.

The wind was like cool silk, scented with nothing but the sweetness of trees and the clean dust of the mountains falling away behind them. The sky was still cloudy but the morning sun broke through in spots, warming the wood of the deck under his feet. They were flying above foothills, sparsely forested with big fern trees and vividly pink thorn bushes. Moon thought he heard the distant high-pitched roar of a mountain skyling, but it was lost in the wind and might have been nothing.

Jade perched on the railing, looking down at the ground passing below, and Stone was up in the bow. Chime was in the steering cabin, yawning and leaning on the control pillar. Malachite sat in the center of the deck, facing back toward the way they had come, her eyes on the sky. She wore her Arbora form, though she didn't look much less formidable. On the softer Arbora scales, it was easier to see her scars.

Moon went to sit near Malachite. She acknowledged his presence with a flick of a spine and tilted her head to regard him.

He started to speak, had to clear his throat, and said, "I'm sorry I said those things to you, back at the court."

Malachite acknowledged the apology with a nod. "You're angry at what happened. You'll be angry for a long time. So will I. All we can do is try not to let it rule us. Or hide it better, when it does."

Moon thought she was probably right. He looked into the wind, squinting against the dawn light. "I want to be with Jade."

It was encouraging that Malachite's reaction was a resigned snort. Her voice dry, she said, "I gathered that."

"Ivory seems like a good queen, but I don't want her."

Malachite's spines rippled in annoyance. "Ivory is presumptuous." So no one had been behind Ivory's offer for him except Ivory. That was also encouraging. Malachite added, "I could get a queen for you from any court in the Reaches you wanted."

Moon said, "I want Indigo Cloud." He was aware that Jade had been listening intently to the conversation from the beginning, and that Malachite knew it. Now Stone strolled back from the bow and sat down several paces away, keeping his expression carefully neutral. In the steering cabin, Chime had shifted to his Raksuran form so he could hear them better.

Malachite turned to face Moon, her head cocked skeptically. "Because she lets you do whatever you want?"

"She trusts me to take care of myself, even when she doesn't want to. I can't be like a normal consort; I'll just cause trouble. Look what I

did at Opal Night, and I wasn't even trying."

Malachite didn't dispute that. Then she asked the question Moon had been dreading. "Why haven't you had a clutch?"

Moon sensed Jade react, a flinch that rattled her spines. He set his jaw, gathering his resolve. If he admitted it, Malachite would have to realize no other court would take him. Jade apparently still wanted him, but there was no telling what the rest of Indigo Cloud's reaction would be. Let's just concentrate on getting back there first. He said, "Because I'm infertile."

Malachite's eyes narrowed in disbelief, a reaction that was not what he had been expecting. She also gave the impression that this was the first thing he had ever said that surprised her. "You're not infertile."

Jade said, "Of course you're not infertile!" She hopped down from her perch and came to sit across from him. She hissed in exasperation. "We're queens, we know."

"How am I supposed to know that?" Moon floundered for a moment. He had been so certain. He blurted, "Then why haven't we had a clutch?"

Jade folded her arms and looked away. "I don't know." From her expression, it cost her something to say the words aloud, but after they were out she seemed almost relieved. Her spines twitched anxiously. "I was afraid it would be blamed on you, that the court would think you weren't trying."

It had never occurred to Moon that Jade might be as insecure as he was, that she might have wanted to avoid the subject for reasons of her own, that she had been just as afraid as he had been. "But—" He began, then cut the word off with a yelp when Stone clipped him in the back of the head.

Obviously caught between fury and exasperation, Stone said, "It didn't occur to you to ask me?"

"You were gone!" Snarling, Moon moved out of arm's reach. He saw Chime, in the steering cabin, clap a hand over his eyes. Celadon, who had wandered up from the stern at some point and leaned against the railing, shook her head. He protested, "I was waiting for you to get back!"

Stone flung his hands up to the sky as if asking it to witness what he had to put up with. He turned to Jade. "You didn't ask Pearl?"

"Of course not." Jade sounded as if that was the most idiotic thing she had ever heard. "I can't talk to her about anything."

Stone glared. "Can't or won't?"

Malachite hissed, and everyone abruptly stopped talking.

Malachite tapped her claws on the deck. She didn't look like she was struggling to hold on to her patience, but then she wouldn't. She asked Jade, "You've suppressed your fertility in the past?"

Jade gritted her teeth. "Yes."

Malachite tilted her head. "With other consorts?"

"No!" Jade bared her fangs briefly. "Moon is the only consort I've ever been with." After a moment, she explained, "The Fell attacked our old colony. I couldn't risk a clutch."

Malachite sighed, though the tension in her body didn't ease. She said pointedly, "We can't get clutches at will, even at your age. And suppressing your fertility your first time with the consort you plan to breed with can delay conception later. Especially if the court is under stress."

Jade frowned, but her spines gradually relaxed. "But it's been three changes of the month."

Stone buried his face in his hands and growled.

Malachite said, "The line-grandfather is right. Three changes of the month is not a long time. Especially under these circumstances."

"Oh." Jade looked at Moon. He looked at her. She said, "Next time, ask me if you think you're infertile."

"All right," he agreed. "Next time, ask Pearl how long it takes to get a clutch." She hissed at him.

Stone cut to the point. He asked Malachite, "So? Can we have him?"

She stood. She said, "I'll consider it," and walked toward the stern, collecting Celadon on the way.

Jade let her breath out in a long sigh. Watching Malachite's back, she said in a low voice, "That's an improvement."

With a hiss of relief, Stone said, "Just both of you stay out of it now. Give her time, and wait till she makes the first move before you talk about it."

"Oh, you're going to help, now?" Jade asked him, lifting her brows. "I noticed you being conspicuously silent before."

Stone gave her a dark look. "If you think me sticking a claw in would have helped, you're wrong. Since you got here, it's been

between you and her.” He jerked his head toward Moon. “And she’s just like him. In her head, that Fell attack on the eastern court happened yesterday. We’re lucky we’re getting out of this with so little trouble.”

Stone walked away. Moon and Jade regarded each other. Moon said, “Little trouble?”

“I suppose it could have been worse,” Jade admitted.

There were a couple of things Moon still wanted to get straight. He asked, “What about Ember?” If she said “Who?” like Stone had...

“I didn’t know they were bringing him.” Jade met his gaze directly. “I told you, he was Emerald Twilight’s idea of an apology. And I didn’t take him in your place. I don’t think I exchanged two words with him before we left. I was busy trying to keep the hunters from being eaten.” Her voice softened, and she added, “I tell you now, if I ever take a second consort, it will be with your approval.”

Moon immediately felt guilty. He didn’t want Jade to change to accommodate him, and he didn’t want to hurt Ember’s feelings. But this was something that should probably wait until they got back to Indigo Cloud. He said, “It should be someone older, and not as pretty as me.”

Jade’s mouth quirked. “We’ll see.”

There was one thing more Moon needed to ask. “At Indigo Cloud, I saw Merry and Gold making a bracelet or something. It had little Aeriati figures. They acted... twitchy, like I wasn’t supposed to know about it.”

“Well, you weren’t. A consort is supposed to get a gift when his first clutch is conceived.”

“Oh.” Apparently Stone had been right all along: Moon was an idiot.

Jade added, “It takes a long time to make something like that, so I told them to go ahead.” She shrugged her spines in resignation. “I was hoping it would give me luck.”

He leaned against her and rubbed his cheek on her shoulder. “I don’t think we need luck. I think we just need... some time to relax.”

She glanced back to make sure Malachite was out of sight, then put an arm around his waist and pulled him against her side. “That would be wonderful.”

It took several days to reach Opal Night, though fortunately they were uneventful. As soon as they were certain the Fell weren't following them, Stone went hunting with Floret and Saffron. They stopped the boat at a small lake at the edge of the foothills to butcher the carcasses and to change and refill the water stores and flush out the latrine, but ended up using the chance to bathe and rinse the blankets and their clothing as well.

It lost them most of the morning, but it was better for everyone, especially those still in healing sleep, to get rid of as much of the Fell stench as possible. Moon felt better about being able to hand Delin back a flying boat that though battered, didn't stink and was reasonably clean. Malachite and Lithe were able to coax Shade to eat a little meat later that day, so maybe the lack of stench had helped him, too.

Moon was sitting with Shade on the railing near the bow, watching the ground go by, when Shade said, "I told Malachite what happened. The part about what the Fell made me do."

Below, the fern-thorn forests of the lake country were gradually giving way to the high grasses of the plains. Moon said, "What did she say?"

"That it wasn't my fault. That I did what I had to do to keep us alive." Shade's shoulders were still slumped. "She also said what you said, that I shouldn't tell anybody else about it."

Moon thought that over, about lies and protective concealment, and how it might fester for someone like Shade, as opposed to someone more used to it, like him. At the moment, Shade thought he was the only one who had had to do something repugnant to survive. Moon said, "I don't think you should tell anyone. Unless you need to, to help them." And he told Shade about how he had met the Fell in Saraseil, about how he had killed Liheas, the real story that he had told only to Jade, and not the abbreviated version he had told to others.

The wounded continued to heal under Lithe's care, and two of Ivory's warriors woke from the healing sleep and were able to move around a little. Root woke a day later, still too injured to sit up and having difficulty speaking, but able to indicate to Floret and Chime that he wanted a blow-by-blow account of everything he had missed.

When they crossed the plain between Aventera and the Reaches, Stone caught sight of a bladder-boat, but it didn't try to approach. Everyone else ignored it, but Celadon and Moon leaned on the railing, speculating on what the Aven terans were doing now and secretly

hoping the bladder-boat would come this way in a threatening manner so they could start a fight with it. After a time, Celadon said, "Thank you for trying to save Dare. I saw part of what happened. We had ended up in some sort of small passage, and there were slits in the outer wall we could see through, but they were too narrow to climb out of."

Moon thought not being able to get outside at that moment had probably saved all their lives. And he didn't want to talk about poor Dare. "How did you get out?"

"We went down through the city, trying to find a way out that was so far below the bladder-boats that they wouldn't be able to shoot us. The Avenirans trapped us at one point but Delin got one of their weapons and started shooting it at them. After that, they backed off and we made it out through an opening down near the statue's feet. The sac had already left by then, so I sent the warriors and Delin to tell the queens and I started after it. Malachite and the others caught up to me that night." She rippled her spines, as if shaking off the angry memories. "Hopefully this will be the end of the Fell trying to make crossbreeds."

"Hopefully," Moon said.

She eyed him. "You don't think so?"

"How many flights did this thing talk to? Some of them must have ignored it, but... there's no telling how far the idea spread through the flights in the east."

Celadon sighed. "Pessimism is one of your more annoying qualities."

Moon wasn't going to argue that. He added, "But at least that thing is dead and we don't have to worry about it getting out and going on a rampage."

"At least," Celadon said pointedly. "I wish our ancestors had killed it when they had the chance."

So did Moon. "They wanted to torture it more than they wanted to kill it."

She shrugged her spines. "Sometimes it's easy to remember that they were the Fell's ancestors, too."



Warrior scouts met them a day's flight out from Opal Night, and some rode the rest of the way in on the flying boat, while others flew ahead to give the good news to the colony.

It was late afternoon when the boat glided over the ridge and into the shadow of the standing half of the split mountain-tree. The wind was a little high and gray clouds threatened rain in the distance, but Opal Night was more active than Moon had ever seen it before. The Arbora were out on the landing platform, climbing up the branches of the fallen half of the mountain-tree. There were so many warriors in the air, the boat could barely navigate through them.

As the boat drew closer, Moon spotted Delin, surrounded by the other members of his crew. They stood on the landing platform with some of the older Arbora, all waving wildly. Moon shifted to his winged form, leapt the railing, and glided down to land beside them.

Delin threw his arms wide in greeting. "You live! I am so pleased!"

Wanting to get this over with quickly, Moon said, "I'm glad you're alive too. There's a hole in the bottom of your boat."

Chime landed behind him, and added, "And we used all your lamp oil. And all the fire packets for your shooting weapon got burned up."

Delin smiled. "This will be a story worth hearing."



That night, Jade and the warriors were offered one of Opal Night's better guest bowers, next to the rooms where Delin and the Islanders had been staying.

Root was doing much better, but Song still spent most of her time asleep. They made pallets of furs and blankets for them on the floor, and Moon carried Song in himself. The wound across her throat was already white with scar tissue, though her skin was so bruised her chest and throat looked more green-black than dark bronze. She blinked and woke, startled, and clutched at his chest. An instant later she recognized him and relaxed, tucking her face into the crook of his arm. It made Moon's heart flutter, and reminded him of how much he missed Frost, Thorn, Bitter and the other children.

Once everyone was settled, Jade told him, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Where are you going?" he asked, startled.

"You are going back to your bower," Jade told him. "I don't know if this is another one of Malachite's tests for me, but if it is, I have no intention of failing it." She bit him lightly on the neck. "Now go."

Stone went with him, and when they reached the consorts' hall,

Moon found the young consorts of Malachite's line, the ones descended from her long-dead sister queen, had moved back in. They were keeping Shade company in his bower, and watched Moon with wide-eyed curiosity and awe when he came to check on Shade. The fact that Shade was in the middle of the story of Moon ripping the underwater window open with Chime and Lithe's help may have had something to do with that.

Moon found his temporary bower undisturbed, though Malachite had sent over some more clothes for him, which meant he was going to leave Opal Night with a lot more than he had arrived with. He was glad he had left the ivory disk that had belonged to his father behind in his pack. There had been too many chances to lose it on their adventures. He put it on now, looping the leather cord over his head.

Stone watched him do it but didn't comment. As they settled down to sleep, he said, "It'll be a relief to get home."

Moon stretched out on the fur. "I hope nothing's happened while we've been gone."

Stone growled under his breath. "That's what I said, too, coming back on that damn boat."

"None of this was my fault," Moon pointed out.

Stone made a noise eloquent of derision.

Moon woke sometime later, aware he hadn't slept for very long. The air was filled with sound; the blended harmony of high and low notes, a chorus of voices. The Court of Opal Night was singing.

Moon slipped out of the furs, stepped around Stone, and went to the doorway.

The sound didn't echo through the colony so much as fill all the available space like water poured into a bowl. He shouldn't have been able to tell the source, but he could. It was coming from the colony's central well.

He went down the corridor to the nearest opening, the one near the waterfall and the lake. He stopped in the doorway and leaned against the wall in the shadows.

There was movement all through the well, the light from windows gleaming off scales or skin. All of Opal Night was gathered here, sitting on the terraced platforms or along the stones lining the water, clinging to the walls. Singing.

It was the first time the song didn't sound frighteningly alien, didn't seem like something foreign was trying to invade Moon's mind.

It sounded warm and welcoming and right. He could distinguish individual voices in the chorus, in a way he never had before at Indigo Cloud. He could hear Celadon, and Onyx, Umber. There was Shade, not far above Moon's head, sitting in the window of his bower, the other consorts around him. He could tell which voices were Arbora, and pick out Feather and Lithe. And Malachite's voice was woven all through the others, like a pillar supporting the rest of the colony.

Moon leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, and thought, All right, I get it now. And then he joined in.



They spent nearly a month at Opal Night.

It was a busy time, since Malachite wanted Moon to meet all the other members of his line that he was closely related to, which amounted to something close to three hundred Aeriats and Arbora. The delay also gave Auburn time to fulfill Chime's request for a search of the Opal Night mentors' libraries for any past stories of Arbora who had transformed into warriors.

When Moon asked Chime about it one night, Chime said, "There was only one story about it happening to a mentor, and that was nearly a hundred turns ago as far as Auburn could tell." Chime sighed.

"And?" Moon prompted. Chime's depressed expression was beginning to worry him.

"It didn't go into a lot of detail, but it said her healing skills and ability to make heat and light never came back."

"Oh." Moon hadn't realized that Chime had still been holding onto that hope. "But did it say anything about hearing things?"

Chime turned his teacup around. "It said that she got 'older skills' and her auguries were different, but 'often useful.'"

"It sounds like they didn't want to give much detail." That wasn't encouraging.

"Exactly. I think 'older skills' mean things that our Ancestors could do." Chime shrugged uneasily. "I'm not sure how I feel about that. I don't think I like our Ancestors much anymore."

"You're still you," Moon pointed out. "And your older skills keep helping us stay alive."

"However I got them." Chime waved those words away. "I mean, I know I can still be useful, and I'm glad about that. I just wish I had more control over it. Though at least now I know I'm not some weird aberration, that this has happened before." Chime didn't look entirely

cheered by that thought, but he did seem less worried.

They finally left for Indigo Cloud, and had a thankfully uneventful trip through the suspended forest. Days ago, Jade had sent a message through Opal Night's allied courts, telling Pearl that they would be returning as soon as negotiations for Moon were completed. They had received a message back that all was well at Indigo Cloud, but it was still a relief to approach the colony tree on the repaired flying boat and see the platforms were all intact, the Arbora moving through the gardens and the warriors circling the clearing.

A dozen warriors landed on the boat to greet them, and Moon saw a couple members of the Islander crew exchange grins. He knew how they felt; he didn't think he would ever get over the thrill of seeing a large group of Raksura in flight at once, either.

One of the young female warriors who had landed on the deck came to Jade, shifted to groundling, and said, "Jade, I need to tell you something."

Moon knew she was one of the warriors attached to Jade's faction and that her name was Serene, but he hadn't spoken to her much. She looked worried, and he immediately noticed that Sand and some of Jade's other warriors, while they greeted Balm, Chime, and Floret and the others, were clearly keeping an eye on Serene.

Jade took Serene's arm and led her away a short distance to the far side of the boat. She didn't object when Moon followed.

Serene lowered her voice to a whisper, "Pearl took Ember." She winced in anticipation of Jade's reaction.

"What?" Moon said. He stared at Jade.

Jade didn't even seem surprised. "That's all right; I expected it," she assured Serene. "Everything's fine. Tell the others."

Serene let out her breath in relief and smiled. "Oh, good. We've been so worried, and no one wanted to tell you. We drew lots for it and I lost." She shifted to her winged form and bounced over to the other warriors.

Jade seemed genuinely unconcerned. She told Moon, "If I hadn't wanted it to happen, I would have brought him with me."

"But... He's a kid."

"If he was still a child, Emerald Twilight wouldn't have sent him." At his expression, she said, "He's sweet, and biddable, and comes from a prestigious bloodline. He's exactly what she likes. It's been turns and turns since Rain died, and when you showed up was the first time

she'd expressed interest in another consort."

"Expressed interest? Is that what you call it?"

"This is a good thing," Jade told him. "Now Pearl will pay more attention to the colony. And mind her own business, instead of mine."

Moon thought that was optimistic. And he also thought he would reserve judgment until he talked to Ember.



He didn't see Ember until later that night.

The first thing Moon did was visit the nurseries. It was a relief that this homecoming was a good deal less fraught than the last one. Frost had taken this absence much better, apparently solely due to Jade's explanation that she had to fight a rival over him. Once the hysterical joy of the fledglings and Arbora children had settled down a little, Moon sat with Bitter and Thorn in his lap and told a rapt Frost and the others the story of how Jade had fought other queens and Fell rulers and a progenitor for him, until his mother had finally agreed to allow her to formally take Moon as her consort.

"There are fledglings at Opal Night?" Frost asked when the story was done. "Consorts?" Thorn nudged her, and she added, "And queens?"

"Lots of them." Moon could already see where this was going. "And when it's time, if you're good, you might meet some of them."

There was a gathering in the greeting hall and an ongoing celebration through the colony, for their safe return and also for the alliance with Opal Night. Blossom told Moon that there had already been a couple of trading visits from courts who had previously ignored their overtures, so word was spreading through the Reaches and Indigo Cloud's status was rising rapidly.

For Moon the celebrations mostly involved a lot of food and telling the story of what had happened over and over again for everyone who had been too far away to hear details the first few times. Moon was hoarse from answering questions about Opal Night, and about the underwater city. He left a group of mentors and other Arbora endlessly speculating on the creature's origins and how the city might have been constructed, and looked for Ember.

As far as he could tell, Jade and Pearl hadn't discussed the situation, and he had to admit that Pearl seemed more at ease and to be enjoying the party in a relaxed way he hadn't seen her demonstrate before. River was still present in her group of warriors, though Moon had noticed that he spent most of his time sitting next to Drift and

trying not to appear depressed. Moon felt a little sympathetic, but only a little. He thought this would be better for River in the long run than continuing to take the place of a consort. But he bet River didn't think so.

He found Ember on one of the bigger balconies above the greeting hall, watching the celebration with some of Pearl's warriors. Vine was one of them, though River and Drift weren't there. Moon ignored them, and asked Ember, "Can I talk to you?"

Vine immediately leapt off the balcony, and the other warriors scrambled to follow his lead.

Ember looked worried. "I don't want to be first consort," he said immediately. "I don't want to challenge you."

Moon hadn't even known that was an option, but he wasn't concerned. "Not about that." He sat down on the smooth wood of the floor. Below in the gathering hall, warriors and Arbora were still sitting around in groups, finishing off the last of the food. Jade, Balm, Chime, and Stone sat with Delin and some of his crew near the waterfall. Delin was writing furiously in his book, and Jade was explaining something that required her to wave her arms a lot and had made Balm and Chime almost fall over laughing. Stone looked unimpressed, so Moon assumed it was something about past exploits of certain line-grandfathers.

He looked up to see Ember watching him warily. He seemed less nervous and underfed, though to Moon he still looked barely older than Thorn. "Are you all right? I mean, Pearl didn't..." Ember was now staring at him as if he had no idea what Moon was talking about. That was probably a good sign. "... trick you into this? Into accepting her?"

"Because she's older? Oh, no." Ember shook his head. "Young queens always frightened me a little. But Pearl is strong and beautiful, like them, but she's so calm, too. And patient with me." He smiled at Moon. "I'm happy."

Pearl? Calm and patient? Moon thought, but managed to keep his expression neutral. Maybe it was just him that annoyed Pearl so much. "All right, then. That was what I wanted to ask."

Moon started to get up and Ember said, "Wait. I wanted..." and halted in confusion. Moon sat down again, and Ember took a deep breath. "Even after being here for a while, I don't feel like I know the court very well. While you were gone, everyone was very unsettled and upset, and then Jade was hurt, and the line-grandfather came back with the groundlings, and Jade left with him and the others

and... I don't think the line-grandfather likes me."

"He doesn't like anybody at first," Moon said. He wasn't sure what Ember was asking. "What do you want to know?"

"I guess I want to know..." Ember seemed to gather his courage. "What was it like when you first came here?"

Moon shook his head a little. In some ways it had been a lifetime, and in some ways he felt as if he had just arrived. And it was going to take some preliminary explanation about groundlings and what Moon's life had been like before he knew he was a Raksura.

"It's a long story," he said, hoping Ember would change his mind. Instead, Ember wrapped his arms around his knees and settled back against the wall like a fledgling ready to be told a go-to-sleep story. It was hard to resist. And it occurred to Moon that for the first time in his life, he could tell the whole story.

"About forty turns ago there was a colony in the east, and a warrior named Swift, who had to change her name to Sorrow..."



Appendix I

The Court of Indigo Cloud

Aeriat

Queens

Pearl—Reigning Queen.

Jade—Sister Queen.

Amber—former Sister Queen of Pearl, now dead.

Azure—the queen who took Stone, now dead.

Frost—a fledgling queen of the court of Sky Copper, now adopted by Indigo Cloud.

Indigo—the Reigning Queen who originally led the court away from the Reaches to the east.

Solace—a Sister Queen in an earlier generation of the court, who was the first to visit the Golden Isles.

Consorts

Stone—line-grandfather.

Rain—Pearl's last consort, now dead.

Moon—Jade's consort.

Thorn and Bitter—fledgling consorts of Sky Copper, now adopted by Indigo Cloud.

Cloud—the consort Indigo stole from Emerald Twilight.

Sable—Solace's consort.

Dust and Burn—young consorts given away by Pearl when Rain died. Dust became the second consort to the reigning queen of Wind Sun.

Warriors

River—leader of Pearl's faction of warriors. A product of one of Amber's royal clutches.

Drift—River's clutchmate.

Branch—River and Drift's clutchmate, killed in a Fell ambush.

Root—young warrior from an Arbora clutch; a member of Jade's faction.

Song—young female warrior; a member of Jade's faction.

Spring—fledgling female, one of only two survivors from Amber's last clutch of warriors.

Snow—fledgling male, Spring's clutchmate.

Balm—female warrior, and Jade's clutchmate. Jade's strongest supporter and leader of her faction.

Chime—former Arbora mentor, now a warrior; a member of Jade's faction.

Vine and Coil—male warriors of Pearl's faction, though they chafe under River's rule.

Floret—female warrior of Pearl's faction.

Sand—a young male warrior of Jade's faction.

Band and Fair—young male warriors of Pearl's faction.

Sage—an older male warrior of Pearl's faction.

Serene—a young female warrior of Jade's faction.

Briar and Aura—young female warriors, inclining to Jade's faction, but currently unattached.

Arbora

Mentors

Flower—leader of the Mentors' Caste.

Heart—young female mentor, one of the Arbora rescued from the Dwei Hive by Moon.

Merit—young male mentor, rescued with Heart.

Copper—a young male mentor, still in the nurseries.

Thistle—a young female mentor.

Teachers

Petal—former leader of the Teachers' Caste, killed in the Fell attack on the old Indigo Cloud colony.

Bell—new leader of the Teachers' Caste, and clutchmate to

Chime.

Blossom—an older female, one of only two teachers to escape during the Fell attack on the colony. Later learned to pilot a Golden Isles Wind-ship.

Bead—a young female, she escaped the colony with Blossom.

Rill, Bark, and Weave—female teachers.

Gift, Needle, and Dream—young female teachers, rescued from the Dwei Hive by Moon.

Snap—young male teacher, also rescued from the Dwei Hive.

Dash—a very old male teacher.

Gold—an older female teacher, and the best artisan in the court.

Merry—a younger male teacher, and Gold's student.

Hunters

Bone—leader of the Hunters' Caste.

Braid, Salt, Spice, Knife—young male hunters.

Bramble, Blaze, Plum—young female hunters.

Wake—an older female hunter.

Strike—a very young hunter, male, who volunteered to test the Fell poison.

Soldiers

Knell—leader of Soldiers' Caste, and clutchmate to Chime.

Grain—the first Arbora to speak to Moon and to order him to leave Indigo Cloud.

Shell—Grain's clutchmate, killed in the Fell attack on the colony.

The Court of Emerald Twilight

Aeriat

Queens

Ice—reigning queen of Emerald Twilight.

Tempest—senior sister queen, Ash's birthqueen.

Ash—youngest daughter queen.

Halcyon—another sister queen, Tempest's clutchmate.

Consorts

Shadow—first consort to Ice.

Fade—second consort to Tempest, now dead.

Ember—consort sent to Indigo Cloud, from Tempest and Fade's only clutch.

Warriors

Willow—a female Warrior who greets visitors at Emerald Twilight.

Torrent—female warrior, from a queen's clutch with Tempest and Halcyon.

Beacon, Prize—female warriors of Tempest's faction.

Dart, Streak, Gust—male warriors of Tempest's faction.

The Court of Opal Night

Aeriat

Queens

Malachite—reigning queen of Opal Night.

Onyx—sister queen.

Celadon—daughter queen, of Malachite's line.

Ivory—another daughter queen, of Onyx's line.

Consorts

Dusk—first consort to Malachite, killed after the attack on the eastern colony.

Umber—first consort to Onyx.

Shade—young consort, son of Malachite's consort Night.

Warriors

Rise—female warrior of Opal Night, of Malachite's faction.

Saffron—female warrior, clutchmate of Ivory.

Sorrow—female warrior who took care of Moon as a fledgling, killed by Tath.

Horn, Tribute—male warriors of Ivory's faction.

Gallant, Fleet—female warriors of Ivory's faction.

Dare, Rime—male warriors of Celadon's faction.

Arbora

Mentors

Lithe—female mentor, young but powerful.

Tear—older female mentor, now dead.

Reed—young female mentor

Auburn—an older male mentor.

Teachers

Feather—female teacher, survivor of the eastern colony.

Russet—female teacher, survivor of the eastern colony.

Twist, Yarrow—two male teachers killed in the eastern colony.

Luster—a male teacher.

Moss—a young male teacher.

Hunters

Fair—a female hunter killed in the eastern colony.

The Court of Veridian Sea

Amaranth—reigning queen.

Flint—her first consort.

The Court of Sunset Water

Zephyr—a sister queen, daughter of an Emerald Twilight consort, Shadow's clutchmate, who was given to the reigning Sunset Water queen.

Appendix II

Excerpt from

Observations of the Raksura: Volume Thirty-Seven of A Natural History by scholar-preeminent Delin-Evran-lindel

The Two Breeds of the Raksura

Arbora: Arbora have no wings but are agile climbers, and their scales appear in a variety of colors. They have long tails, sharp retractable claws, and manes of flexible spines and soft “frills,” characteristics that are common to all Raksura. They are expert artisans and are dexterous and creative in the arts they pursue for the court’s greater good. In their alternate form they are shorter than Aeriats Raksura and have stocky, powerful builds. Both male and female Arbora are fertile, and sometimes may have clutches that include warrior fledglings. This is attributed to queens and consorts blending their bloodlines with Arbora over many generations.

The four castes of the Arbora are:

Teachers—They supervise the nurseries and train the young of the court. They are also the primary artisans of the court, and tend the gardens that will be seen around any Raksuran colony.

Hunters—They take primary responsibility for providing food for the court. This includes hunting for game, and gathering wild plants.

Soldiers—They “guard the ground” and protect the colony and the surrounding area.

Mentors—They are Arbora born with arcane powers, who have skill in healing and augury. They also act as historians and record-keepers for the court, and usually advise the queens.

Aeriat: The winged Raksura. Like the Arbora, they have long tails, sharp retractable claws, and manes of flexible spines and soft frills.

Warriors—They act as scouts and guardians, and defend the colony from threats from the air, such as the Fell. Warriors are sterile and cannot breed, though they appear as male and female forms. Their scales are in any number of bright colors. Female warriors are

usually somewhat stronger than male warriors. In their alternate form, they are always tall and slender. They are not as long-lived generally as queens, consorts, and Arbora.

Consorts—Consorts are fertile males, and their scales are always black, though there may be a tint or “undersheen” of gold, bronze, or blood red. At maturity they are stronger than warriors, and may be the longest lived of any Raksura. They are also the fastest and most powerful flyers, and this ability increases as they grow older. There is some evidence to suggest that consorts of great age may grow as large or larger than the major kethel of the Fell.

Queens—Queens are fertile females, and are the most powerful and deadly fighters of all the Aeriats. Their scales have two brilliant colors, the second in a pattern over the first. The queens’ alternate form resembles an Arbora, with no wings, but retaining the tail, and an abbreviated mane of spines and the softer frills. Queens mate with consorts to produce royal clutches, composed of queens, consorts, and warriors.

Appendix III

Excerpt from
Additions to the List of Predatory Species by scholar-eminent-posthumous Venar-Inram-Alil.

Fell are migratory and prey on other intelligent species.

The Known Classes of Fell

Major kethel - The largest of the Fell, sometimes called harbingers, major kethel are often the first sign that a Fell flight is approaching. Their scales are black, like that of all the Fell, and they have an array of horns around their heads. They have a low level of intelligence and are believed to be always under the control of the rulers.

Minor dakti - The dakti are small, with armor plates on the back and shoulders, and webbed wings. They are somewhat cunning, but not much more intelligent than kethel, and fight in large swarms.

Rulers - Rulers are intelligent creatures that are believed to have some arcane powers of entrancement over other species. Rulers related by blood are also believed to share memories and experiences through some mental bond. They have complete control of the lesser Fell in their flights, and at times can speak through dakti and see through their eyes. (Addendum by scholar-preeminent Delin-Evran-lindel: Fell rulers in their winged form bear an unfortunate and superficial resemblance to Raksuran Consorts.)

There is believed to be a fourth class, or possibly a female variant of the Rulers, called the Progenitors.

Common lore holds that if a Fell ruler is killed, its head must be removed and stored in a cask of salt or yellow mud and buried on land in order to prevent drawing other Fell rulers to the site of its death. It is possible that only removing the head from the corpse may be enough to prevent this, but burying it is held to be the safest course.

Appendix IV

Excerpts From

Some Few Known Peoples of the Three Worlds: A Traveler's Warning and Guide

This guide does not include known predatory species.

Cordans are believed to be all that is left of the once great empire centered at Kiaspur. They are short and stocky, with pale gray-green skin and greenish hair. Kiaspur had close attachments with a sealing kingdom in the distant past, and this is shown by the small patches of scales on Cordan skin. They are primarily farmers, and seem open to traders and travelers, but this can be deceptive.

Duazi are nomads who inhabit the moss forests of the far east. Not much is known about them, except that they are believed by some to be highly skilled in plant potions and simples, and are perhaps not safe to approach.

Dwei are not groundlings, yet not skylings. They are large and beetle-like in shape, with hard carapaces, and insect-like wings. They build hives on cliff sides from the secretions of their own bodies, usually in plains or desert country. They farm fungi in their hives and tunnels.

Emara are the dominant people of the old empire of Emriat-terrene. They have light blue skin and a hard bony ring around their skulls, topped by an uneven pearl-like surface. They are noted city-builders, and engage in a great deal of trade and commerce.

Freian are believed to be descended from a waterling species near the coast of Emriat-terrene, though they have lost their ability to breathe underwater. They are short in stature, and their skin is gray-green and scaled, and they have a bony vestigial head crest. They are artisans and workers among the coastal cities of the western freshwater sea.

Golden Islanders inhabit the flying islands of the Yellow Sea. They

are short, slim people, with smooth white hair worn long and golden skin and golden eyes. They are traders and scholars, often deliberately seeking contact with new races and species, and are always safe to approach.

Hassi are eastern jungle dwellers who build complex cities atop the giant link-trees.

Iskanieri are nomads of the eastern jungles.

Karamed live near the coasts of the western freshwater sea, and are believed to be related to elements of the eastern Kishan Empire. They are tall in stature, usually slim, with dark brown skin and black hair, and are generally nomadic traders in the near west and city-builders in the far west.

Kinet inhabit the mountain ranges to the west of Abascene. They are tall and often strongly built, with smooth brown skin which is said to be thick and tough to protect against the cold and wind. Their hair is usually dark brown and curling and worn loose, and they have white or yellowish tusks to either side of the nose. Their principal city is Keres-gedin, also called The Turning City. They are miners, traders, and builders of tools and machines much prized by the Kish in particular.

Kek mainly live in the forests of the forbidden western reaches, but there are also said to be coastal Kek and desert Kek. They have stick-like limbs, with a fine dusting of fur, often green, and their bodies are narrow and flat. They have round eyes and a round mouth, a narrow nose, on a square-shaped head. They trade in plants and grasses, eat no meat, and are usually safe to approach, though their language is complex and difficult to learn.

Mirani frequent the deep east of the Abascene and the Crescent Coast. They are farmers and herders, with light green skin and light-colored hair. They can be insular, though are usually amiable to traders.

Riverians are travelers and explorers along the Crescent Coast, though their home land is not well known. They have white silky fur and bony head crests, and often engage in trade.

Sericans are nomadic traders who travel in large wooden caravan wagons, through both the plains and mountains of the far and near east, and throughout the lands of Imperial Kish. Their land of origin is unknown, at least to outsiders. They have dark blue skin and straight

black hair, and are always safe to approach.

Sipar are the denizens of a far west empire, and are often found some distance from their land of origin. They are tall and slim, and have very pale skin tinged with gray, and black or silver-gray hair. Their heads, limbs, and torsos are long in proportion to their height, and they have high foreheads and elongated features. They are known for their trading networks, and are also builders of gadgets and machines. They are usually safe to approach as individuals or small groups, but their complex systems of government can make travelers to their cities uneasy.

Telethi are nomadic, living primarily on boats and large trading ships, and are found in coastal regions all through the southwest. They are tall and strongly built, with dark gold skin and hair.

Verineish are sealings, living only in saltwater seas. They have green scaled skin and dark green hair of a texture and thickness that resembles water plants. Their hands and feet are webbed and clawed, and they have sharply pointed fins along their arms and legs. They are insular and hard to approach, but not counted as dangerous.

Water Travelers are waterlings, and very dangerous to approach. Though they often engage in coastal trade, they are carrion eaters and are believed by some to feed on unwary groundlings, if the opportunity presents itself. The main body of a Water Traveler appears to be a groundling from the waist up. Below, a root-like mass floats on the water with tentacles and a mouth beneath the surface. Gray horn structures stand up above the water, surrounding and protecting the surface body, growing out of its arms, back, chest, and vestigial legs. Their skin is gray and studded with hard chips of horn-like growths.

About the Author

Martha Wells was born in 1964 in Fort Worth, Texas, and graduated from Texas A&M University with a B.A. in Anthropology. She is the author of fourteen SF/F novels, including *The Element of Fire*, *City of Bones*, *Wheel of the Infinite*, *The Wizard Hunters*, and the Nebula-nominated *The Death of the Necromancer*. Forthcoming novels include a YA fantasy, *Emilie and the Hollow World*, due out in April of 2013, and a second YA fantasy and a Star Wars novel due out in 2014. She has had short stories in *Black Gate*, *Lone Star Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and the anthologies *Elemental*, *Tales of the Emerald Serpent*, and *The Other Half of the Sky*, and essays in the nonfiction anthologies *Farscape Forever*, *Mapping the World of Harry Potter*, and *Chicks Unravel Time*. She also has two *Stargate Atlantis* media-tie-in novels: *Reliquary* and *Entanglement*. Her books have been published in seven languages. She lives in College Station, Texas, with her husband. Her web site is www.marthawells.com.

Contents

Cover

Copyright

The Cloud Roads

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Appendix I

Appendix II

The Serpent Sea

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Appendix I
Appendix II
Appendix III

The Siren Depths

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Appendix I
Appendix II
Appendix III
Appendix IV

About the Author